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UP: WOOING THE BRAHMIN VOTER

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INDIA TODAY

THE PERILS OF LONG COVID

DOCTORS WARN OF A RANGE OF HEALTH RISKS WELL AFTER THE INFECTION

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Few graphs have brought as much visual relief this year as the one illustrating India's steep fall in Covid-19 cases. From a peak of over 400,000 cases a day in May, we are now down to less than 100,000 daily cases. The 60,471 cases reported on June 15 were the lowest daily count in 75 days. There has been an 85 per cent fall in the number of daily cases since the peak of 406,901 cases on May 7.

INDIA TODAY
THE COVID SURVIVORS
MOVING TESTIMONIES OF HOW THEY BEAT FEAR, STIGMA AND THE DISEASE ITSELF

June 22, 2020

INDIA TODAY
WHEN WILL IT END?
TOP EXPERTS ON INDIA'S BEST HOPES TO HALT THE RAMPAGING SECOND WAVE OF COVID-19

May 24, 2021

India has seen more than 29 million cases since the start of the pandemic, of which 28 million people have recovered. Yet, as the first wave taught us, we must not let our guard down when it comes to Covid-19. This is particularly because we have discovered a fresh set of problems caused by the virus.

Earlier, everyone dismissed Covid-19 as just regular flu, something we could recover from without any side effects. We now know this to be untrue.

The unpredictability of its symptoms continues to baffle experts and patients alike. But over the past year and a half, researchers have collected enough data to confirm that a majority of those infected go on to experience symptoms even after 14 days (the average time it takes for the body to fight off the virus). According to a May 2021 study by the Stanford University School of Medicine, 70 per cent of patients with moderate or severe Covid infection experienced a variety of symptoms months after recovery.

This is known as Long Covid. Symptoms include body ache, fever, fatigue, breathlessness, anxiety, change in voice and even memory lapses. One doctor told us how between 80 and 90 per cent of his patients have been left with dry cough, weakness and the tendency to get dehydrated post recovery. The second and more worrying fact, as doctors tell us, is that the virus is striking every major organ of the body. This is because the virus attaches itself to the ACE2 (angiotensin-converting enzyme) receptors, present in almost all organs of the body, including the lungs, heart, blood vessels, kidneys, liver and gastrointestinal tract. ACE2 is an enzyme that generates small proteins—by slicing up the larger protein angiotensinogen—that then regulate functions in the cell. The virus uses these ACE2 receptors as a doorway to enter and infect the body.

After the heart and the lungs, the two most common vital organs at risk are the brain and kidneys. Blood clots travelling to both these organs have been found in post-mortems of Covid patients.

Inflammation and thrombosis are the two other 'silent killers' that can strike patients who have seemingly recovered from Covid. These are the body's natural defences against a virus attack, but, left to linger after the infection has passed, they can wreak havoc on the body.

In the absence of national data on post-Covid syndrome, as Long Covid is formally known, or information on symptoms and risk factors that increase its likelihood, the accounts of doctors from Covid wards in the country paint a grim picture. Associate Editor Sonali Acharjee spoke to many such doctors across the country to put together our cover story, 'The Perils of Long Covid'.

Long Covid only goes to emphasise the lethality of the virus and the fact that vaccines are the only shield we have against severe infection. There is, hence, a need for the government not to dilute its focus on vaccinating India's 900 million adult population by the end of this year.

The phenomenon of Long Covid requires deeper study and greater understanding. Like an unshakeable spectre, Covid-19 pursues those who believe they have fully recovered. Doctors have to be sensitised about this, and it requires sustained treatment. Delhi, for instance, has a dedicated hospital to treat post-Covid patients. Fortunately, Long Covid can be defeated through a healthy diet, rest and regular medical check-ups. Complacency was never an option when it came to dealing with the virus. As we have now discovered, it applies equally to its after-effects. Obviously, it's not over when you think it's over. So, if you have had corona, be careful.

(Aroon Purie)

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Cover by NILANJAN DAS

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JOIN THE CLUB
Abhishek Banerjee welcomes Mukul Roy into the TMC, June 11

DEBAJYOTI CHAKRABORTY

WEST BENGAL

THE *KHELA* IS STILL ON

By Romita Datta

Last week, BJP leaders were rejoicing over news that the Congress's Jitin Prasada was joining their ranks, seemingly oblivious of a similar crisis unfolding in their own party in West Bengal, where national vice-president Mukul Roy was returning to the Trinamool Congress (TMC), with son Subhrangshu in tow. Learning about the move barely hours before Roy & Co. were to meet TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee and her nephew Abhishek on June 11, top BJP leaders tried in vain to forestall the reverse migration, rubbing salt into wounds inflicted by a humiliating election defeat in the state just over a month ago.

Roy joined the BJP in November 2017 but was never really at home. It's unlikely that his growing discomfort would have gone unnoticed in the party. He was hemmed in by unfriendly colleagues and unable to shake off the cloud of suspicion owing to his decades-long association with Mamata. At one point, he had been Didi's most trusted man and the TMC second-in-command, till irreconcilable differences cropped up over the rise of Abhishek in the party.

For Roy, recognition in the BJP came late. Despite a spectacular per-

DEBAJYOTI CHAKRABORTY

SHOW OF STRENGTH
BJP MLAs, led by Suvendu Adhikari, submit a memorandum on the post-poll violence in West Bengal to Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar, June 14

formance, with Roy's help in the 2019 general election (18 of 42 Lok Sabha seats and a 40 per cent vote share), the party took more than a year to reward him with the post of national vice-president—and not before Roy had registered his protest by pulling down hoardings of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union home minister Amit Shah at his residence in New Delhi. For most part of his brief innings in the BJP, he remained an election convenor, a leader who, in Shah's words, had been brought in to "uproot Mamata". "Dada (Roy) never felt at home in the BJP. At the party's state headquarters (in Kolkata), he didn't even have a proper room to meet supporters. They would wait in the stairwell when Dada held private meetings," says a Roy loyalist in the BJP.

THE EARLY SIGNS

With the central investigative agencies on his heels in the Saradha and Narada scams, the BJP had perhaps assumed that Roy would never jump ship. It clearly failed to read the signs, like the tea-break encounter between Roy and Mamata on January 23, during Netaji's 125th birth anniversary celebrations at Kolkata's Victoria Memorial. Mamata stopped by to enquire about Roy's health while ignoring the BJP's Suvendu Adhikari, who had defected to the BJP barely a month ago.

Sidelined from the BJP's assembly election strategy, Roy did not take kindly to Shah's directive that he contest from the Krishnanagar Uttar seat. In a political career spanning three decades—during which he was Rajya Sabha MP twice and Union railway minister in 2012-13 (UPA-II)—Roy had fought, and lost, an election only once before—in 2001. This time, he tried to wriggle out, citing his poor health—he is severely diabetic—but Shah insisted. Roy went into a sulk, did not campaign hard, but won his seat nevertheless.

Political analysts say Roy was completely marginalised in the BJP. He had little say in the electioneering and his credibility had taken a hit. Even his go-to man in the party, national general secretary and Bengal observer Kailash Vijayvargiya, had started keeping his distance from Roy after the poll results. "Mukul Roy remained an outsider in the BJP. He was treated with suspicion and could not sync with the BJP culture. Now that he is out, he should breathe easy, and so will the BJP," says political commentator Biswanath Chakraborty, who teaches at Kolkata's Rabindra Bharati University.

> **MUKUL ROY WAS NEVER AT EASE IN THE BJP. HE WAS ALWAYS VIEWED WITH SUSPICION DUE TO HIS LONG ASSOCIATION WITH MAMATA**

The TMC's resounding victory (213 of 292 seats that went to polls) erased any second thoughts Roy might have had about leaving the BJP. Assured of a rapprochement with Mamata and Abhishek, he started mending fences. In a tell-tale signal, while at the legislative assembly on May 6 to take oath as an MLA, Roy caught up with old friend and TMC president Subrata Bakshi over tea, skipping BJP state chief Dilip Ghosh's meeting with the party's newly-inducted legislators.

BJP IN DISARRAY

Officially, the BJP has shrugged off Roy's exit as no loss. "I don't think the BJP stands to lose anything; I'm not sure it had gained from him in any manner [in the first place]. Staying in the BJP is tough for anyone coming from a party where 'cut money' and syndicate raj are rampant," said Ghosh during a June 11 party meeting in Bongaon, in North 24 Parganas. Local BJP MP Shantanu Thakur and MLAs Biswajit Das, Ashok Kirtania and Subrata Thakur boycotted the meeting.

Ghosh's bravado notwithstanding, it will be a challenge for the state BJP to prevent more desertions from among its current strength of 74 MLAs (the party had won 77 seats; apart from Roy's exit, two MLAs vacated their seats), especially if the TMC woos them with positions in various boards and corporations. At least 10 legislators, including Roy loyalists like Das and Kirtania, are reportedly eager to cross over to the TMC.

Besides, more than two dozen Muslim leaders who, anticipating Mamata's defeat, had defected from the TMC to the BJP, are reconsidering their decision. Among them are Kashem Ali, vice-president of the BJP's minority cell; Kabirul Islam and former

MLAs Sheikh Parvez Rahman and Alamgir Molla. “The BJP’s determined emphasis on Hindutva has been an eye-opener. Mukul Roy talked of taking us along, but now that he’s gone, our future in the party is sealed,” says Ali. Some Muslim leaders who had defected with Adhikari were really alarmed by his communally polarising remarks during the election campaign.

Meanwhile, a Twitter war has erupted in the state BJP, with Swapan Dasgupta objecting to senior leader Tathagata Roy calling Mukul Roy a “Trojan horse” and Dilip Ghosh badmouthing those who had defected from the TMC to the BJP as “unhealthy flab”. This could only end badly for the BJP.

The Bengal unit of the BJP has other problems too. There is much resentment in the party about the heavy hand of the central leadership in determining the course of the poll campaign. As Ghosh admitted: “Some of our campaign policies were really wrong. They were decided by the central leadership and need to be analysed.” Many others in the party are questioning the ‘top-down’ approach in crafting the electoral strategy, which relegated state veterans with ground-level experience to the margins. Those who had all along maintained that aggressive communal polarisation was culturally at odds with Bengali life are now warning that pursuing the same strategy would further alienate Bengalis in general and Muslims among them—a hefty 30 per cent of the state’s population—in particular.

The BJP not only needs to reassess its plank in Bengal, it must also present a united face. The surface camaraderie of the poll campaign has given way to open hostility between party old-timers and defector newbies, and there are two power centres in the state unit: one led by Ghosh and the other by Adhikari, now leader of the opposition in the state assembly.

MAMATA’S NEW AMMO?

While Mamata has received a spate of applications, she will be selective about who to let in. Those who had left in the run-up to the election and heaped criticism on the TMC may not be entertained. About Roy, Didi maintains that he never spoke ill of his former party during the campaign. Roy, though, had made scathing remarks against Mamata and Abhishek at the time of joining the BJP, accusing them of running the party like a “private enterprise”. Nevertheless, says Mamata: “Mukul is one of our own. He faced a lot of harassment and intimidation from central investigative agencies. His health was deteriorating in the BJP. He will have peace of mind here (in the TMC).”

Mamata has reportedly assured Roy that the party will back him through the Saradha and Narada scam investigations. The TMC believes that the Narada investigation cannot singe Roy without scorching the BJP’s own, such as Adhikari. Roy’s son Subhrangshu will possibly be rehabilitated in the TMC by initially making him the party candidate for the Krishnagar Uttar by-election.

Not in great health and yet to be assigned a formal post, Roy, however, is raring to go. Abhishek, the TMC’s new national general secretary, wants him to play a hand in the party’s ambitious expansion drive. Roy will begin with the Northeast—mainly Tripura and Manipur—where the party has a footprint. In Tripura, the ruling BJP’s house is in disorder, with heavyweight Sudip Roy Barman feeling sidelined by Chief Minister Biplab Kumar Deb. As many as 25 of the 36 BJP legislators in the state are believed to be unhappy with Deb.

While he was in the BJP, Roy often claimed that 70-100 Trinamool MLAs, ready to desert Mamata, were in touch with him. To prove his worth in the TMC, he will now be expected to engineer similar defections from the saffron camp. The BJP is understandably on guard. On June 14, breaking lockdown guidelines, the party sent a delegation of 50 MLAs to Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar to submit a memorandum on the post-poll violence. Apart from being an attempt to keep up the pressure on Mamata, the visit was also a show of strength in the season of political defections. ■

THE DESERTIONS...

34

Trinamool MLAs defected to the BJP ahead of 2021 state election, 13 got tickets

142

(of 292) or 49% of BJP candidates in 2021 were TMC defectors

NOV. 2017

Mukul Roy crossed over to the BJP

2019

In the run-up to the 2019 Lok Sabha poll, 2 MPs (Saumitra Khan and Anupam Hazra), 1 MLA, and dozens of other leaders quit the TMC to join BJP

2020

Ahead of the 2021 assembly election, 3 MPs, 34 MLAs, 1 former MP and 150 other leaders quit the TMC to join BJP, among them Suvendu and Sisir Adhikari (Suvendu’s father), Dinesh Trivedi, Sunil Mondal and Rajib Banerjee

...AND THE HOMECOMING

JUNE 11

Mukul Roy returns to TMC with son Subhrangshu Roy in tow. There’s word that many more are waiting in the wings, about 10 *ghar wapsi* applications (including at least 2 from BJP MLAs) are pending and others (including 3 MPs and 10-15 MLAs) who are waiting for favourable signs before they make a move

A UNITED BATTLE
Farooq Abdullah, centre, and Mehbooba Mufti (left) along with other PAGD leaders talk to the press in Srinagar, June 9

ABID BHAT

JAMMU & KASHMIR

A NEW RAY OF HOPE?

By Moazum Mohammad in Srinagar

For the past week, Jammu and Kashmir has been rife with rumours of all sorts, ranging from Jammu being bestowed standalone statehood to New Delhi extending an olive branch to the mainstream political parties in the erstwhile state. But nothing has been confirmed yet. The rumours were fuelled by the arrival of new security forces in some districts, which police say are returning troops from recently poll-bound states. Liutenant t Governor Manoj Sinha has put to rest the rumours, but apprehensions remain. “We are not convinced,” says National Conference MP and retired justice Hasnain Masoodi. The people talk about the days before August 5, 2019, when then J&K governor Satya Pal Malik had ‘allayed public fears’ about the move to abrogate Article 370. “We can only hope and pray that there is no fresh experiment. I hope the denial issued by the L-G turns out to be true. That said, we are ready for any eventuality,” says Masoodi.

The fresh rumours put the focus back on the People’s Alliance for Gupkar Declaration (PAGD), the five-party forum that is pushing for the restoration of J&K’s special status and statehood. Two partners, the People’s Conference led by Sajad Lone and the Congress, have exited the alliance, and it now includes the National Conference (NC), People’s Democratic Party (PDP), CPI(M), Jammu and Kashmir People’s Movement and the Awami National Conference. The PAGD met at the Fairview residence of former chief minister and PDP president Mehbooba Mufti on June 9. The meeting came after six months but what surprised many was the softening stand of PAGD chief and NC patriarch Farooq Abdullah vis-à-vis the Centre.

Sources say that in the past few weeks, a few leaders from Kashmir, including Altaf Bukhari of J&K Apni Party have been holding backchannel talks with Union home minister Amit Shah about reviving the political process. Apparently, the delimitation process and even fresh assembly elections and restoration of statehood are on the table. The regional parties could get a formal invite for talks in the next few weeks, say sources.

Sources attribute the softening of the PAGD’s stand to some positive indicators from the go-betweens. This has to be seen in the context of recent developments such as L-G Sinha reaching out to political leaders like Abdullah, Sajad Lone and local Congress president G.A. Mir for suggestions on the UT’s Covid preparations. There has been a shake-up in the bureaucracy, too, with J&K cadre IAS officer Arun Kumar Mehta replacing B.V.R. Subrahmanyam as chief secretary. Subrahmanyam had overseen the August 2019 events and had been overtly critical of the mainstream political parties, accusing them of misgovernance and corruption.

Masoodi concurs that these changes are positive, but says on the ground indicators of peace and progress are still elusive. Also, militancy is on the rise with over 40 youngsters joining the rebellion since January. This comes even as the police continues its stringent policies, like not allowing public funerals of militants. “It is a superficial peace enforced by draconian laws such as the UAPA (Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act),” says Masoodi. “The last two years widened the gulf between New Delhi and Kashmir. The government of India has a million reasons to review the abrogation move as none of the objectives on peace and progress has been achieved.”

Since the fall of the PDP-BJP government in June 2018, the Centre has directly or indirectly ruled J&K . With the political vacuum and reports in the international press on rights abuses, there are said to be “external pressures” as well on the BJP government to restore a sense of normalcy in the erstwhile state. On June 9, Dean Thompson, the US acting assistant secretary of state for south and central Asia, noted during a Congressional hearing on ‘Democracy in the Indo-Pacific’ that the Joe Biden-led administration has urged the Indian government to return Kashmir to normalcy as quickly as possible. “There are other electoral steps we’d like to see them take, and that we have encouraged them to do and will continue to do so,” Thompson said.

The poll exercise is expected to happen by the year-end. “Elections are mostly likely to happen in November-December,” says a source, “but in case a third Covid wave hits India, they will be pushed forward to spring next year. But they (the Centre) don’t want to waste any more time now.”

The elections will be preceded by a delimitation exercise meant to redraw electoral constituencies in the UT. Last year, on March 6, the Centre set up a delimitation commission, which included five elected MPs from J&K as associate members. That hasn’t gone anywhere with the three NC members boycotting the panel on the pretext that the constitutional validity of the J&K Reorganisation Act, 2019, is being challenged in the Supreme Court. The delimitation will increase the number of seats in the legislative assembly from 107 to 114, including 24 seats reserved for Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

Amid the raging pandemic, the NC held a meeting of its central working committee on May 27. “Ninety-eight per cent of the participants were ready to be part of the process (delimitation and polls),” says a leader pleading anonymity. They reasoned that the political vacuum is possibly causing greater hardship to the people, and that they should have faith in the Supreme Court, where a five-member constitutional bench is hearing the case on restoring Article 370. NC patriarch Farooq Abdullah has been authorised to take the final call. But before that happens, the party expects a response from the delimitation commission to their letter to alter the modalities. “If they can accommodate our views, we can look into it, but there has been no response so far,” says a senior NC leader. The commission is expected to visit J&K soon.

Back-channel talks with New Delhi suggest that a fresh assembly election and even restoration of statehood are back on the table. But in Kashmir, leaders are still wary

Many theories are being bandied about for the change in heart in the NC and PDP. A plausible reason is the Enforcement Directorate cases against the Abdullah and Mufti families. Though seen as political vendetta, Farooq Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti were summoned to the ED offices, the former in a Rs 43.7 crore misappropriation of funds case of the Jammu and Kashmir Cricket Association when he was chairman. Likewise, the bank accounts of the Mufti family have been frozen. The passports of Mehbooba and her mother have also been blocked. Agha Ruhullah, a senior NC leader who is a former legislator from Budgam and one of the naysayers to talks till Article 370 is restored, agrees that the ED cases could be a reason for the softening stand. “We should forget power politics,” he says. “Even the Gupkar Alliance is a disappointment in terms of objectives. What is the stand of the people of J&K? New Delhi is giving directions and the Alliance is following them.”

But there is a growing realisation among the mainstream parties that staying away from elections is giving the BJP a walkover. The NC and PDP had boycotted the local body poll in October-November 2018, and the BJP and independents took over local governance. Mehbooba Mufti argues that leaving the democratic space vacant in an assembly election will similarly allow their opponents to take over. “At least when you are part of the administration, you can resist some things,” says the 60-year-old. “They continue to legitimise illegitimate things. It is a process that is going on and on.” She likens the abrogation of Article 370 to an active volcano with the lava still flowing.

The PAGD is also worried about the arrests of Kashmiris under vague laws, the lack of political rights and the growing harassment of public/ political leaders. “There is total suffocation,” says Mehbooba, who is also vice-president of the PAGD. “They (the BJP) are putting the might of the country to suppress the people of J&K. The way they have criminalised dissent, it appears they are not ready to accept what we stand for.”

On the ground, however, the moves of the political parties have done little to lift the people’s spirits. The events of August 2019 still haunt everyone. “The abrogation of special status was supposedly to bring integration between New Delhi and Kashmir,” says Sohail Ahmad, a local from south Kashmir. “But we have never been farther apart.” ■

AP PHOTO

IN SEARCH OF A COUNTRY
Hindu refugees from Pakistan, living in Ahmedabad, hold up their Pakistani passports (Dec. 2019)

CITIZENSHIP

The Minority Report

By Rohit Parihar

On May 28, the Centre issued a notification stating that collectors in 13 districts across Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Haryana and Punjab and home secretaries of Punjab and Haryana, have been given the power to grant citizenship to immigrants from any one of six minority religious communities in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. This could benefit at least 30,000 legal non-Muslim immigrants living in India.

The notification read: “In exercise of powers conferred under Section 16 of the Citizenship Act, 1955 (57 of 1955), the Central Government hereby directs that powers exercisable by it for registration as citizen of India under Section 5, or for grant of certificate of naturalisation under section 6 of the Citizenship Act, 1955, in respect of any person belonging to minority community in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, namely, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians, residing in the districts mentioned... and the states mentioned by the collectors...”. The 13 districts include Jalore, Udaipur, Pali, Barmer and Sirohi in Rajasthan; Morbi, Rajkot, Patan and Vadodara in Gujarat; Durg and Balodabazar in Chhattisgarh; Faridabad in Haryana; and Jalandhar in Punjab.

Political observers have red-flagged the notification as “backdoor implementation” of the contentious Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019, the rules and regulations of which are yet to be framed by the ministry of home affairs (MHA). Immediately after the Centre’s May 28 notification, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) general secretary Sitaram Yechury tweeted: “Subterfuge. Rules under CAA-2019 not framed, yet the Centre issues gazette notification to implement it. Petitions challenging validity of the CAA remain unheard. Hope the SC takes this up promptly & stops backdoor implementation.” On June 1, the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) moved the Supreme Court challenging the notification on the ground that the Citizenship Act, 1955, does not make any distinction on the basis of religion. As per Section 5 (1) of the Act, the Centre may register an applicant as a citizen of India as long as s/he is not an illegal immigrant. The categories laid out for such persons to qualify for citizenship do not mention religion. The IUML further argued that the Centre was ignoring the Court’s assurance to the party back in December 2019 (when the IUML had challenged the CAA’s validity), that the staying of the CAA was not necessary at the time as the Rules of the new Act were yet to be framed.

THE IUML HAS CHALLENGED THE MHA’S NOTIFICATION INVITING CITIZENSHIP APPLICATIONS FROM NON-MUSLIM REFUGEES

The MHA responded with the reminder that citizenship is a Central subject and that it periodically delegates powers to states under Section 16 of the Citizenship Act, 1955, to grant citizenship to those eligible. The Centre filed an affidavit on June 14 in response to the IUML’s plea, in which it said that the notification does not relate to CAA and is a “mere delegation of power vested with the Centre to local authorities”. However, the classification of applicants on the basis of religion—and the exclusion of Muslims from the list—is a feature of the CAA and not the 1955 Act, under which the MHA says it has issued the May 28 notification.

In 2016, the Central government had, in a similar step, sought applications for naturalisation from members of these minority communities from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, living in 16 districts across Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. In 2018, the notification was extended for an indefinite period. The latest notification raises the total districts covered to 29 in nine states.

The MHA maintains that the latest notification will benefit only legal immigrants who have already applied for citizenship after a seven-year stay. On the other hand, the CAA will allow similar applications after a stay of five years, for those who entered India on or before December 31, 2014, but, controversially, only the six named religious communities will be eligible to apply.

The Supreme Court on June 15 said it would hear the plea challenging the Centre’s May 28 notification after two weeks. ■

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

ALL-WEATHER ICE-BREAKER

The Nita Ambani-headed Reliance Foundation recently donated 10 all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and 270 weatherproof tents to the Mumbai Police. Shiv Sena scion Aaditya Thackeray is said to be behind the move to approach the foundation for a donation, which was swiftly accepted. The goodwill gesture comes months after the Mumbai Police went through the wringer after a group of crime branch cops were arrested for allegedly being the brains behind planting an explosive-laden vehicle near the Ambani residence. Is this a sign that the Reliance Group and the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi government are putting the controversy behind them and moving on? Both sides are keeping mum on the issue.

AYA RAM, GAYA RAM?

Bihar's JD(U)-BJP government needs the support of former CM **Jitan Ram Manjhi** and his four-MLA Hindustani Awam Morcha (HAM) to survive. Manjhi knows this and keeps them on tenterhooks with his constant needling. First it was criticism of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's picture on Covid vaccination certificates, then it was the birthday wishes for Opposition leader and RJD chief Lalu Prasad Yadav. The government heaved a sigh of relief when Manjhi praised CM Nitish Kumar on May 29. But on June 11, Manjhi was back to his old games—a closed-door meet with the RJD's Tej Pratap Yadav.

ANI

Blessings of Elders

Uttar Pradesh chief minister **Yogi Adityanath** has a special scheme for the Covid-hit elderly, and it has so far helped over 3,000 people, says the government. 'Project Elderline' focuses on the grievances of the state's senior citizens, with a toll-free helpline number, 14567, offering emotional support, healthcare and legal aid tips as well. Come elections in early 2022, the CM's going to need more than just their blessings.

THE LONG WALK

Y.S. Sharmila, the sister of Andhra Pradesh chief minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, launched her YSR Telangana Party (YSRTP) in the neighbouring state on July 8. She is banking on a walkathon to propel her political career, this being her family's signature style of campaigning. It helped both her father, the late Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, and brother Jagan in their march to power. Sharmila is hoping to eat into the vote share of the Congress and the ruling TRS in the 2023 state poll. Except that her foray might actually help the BJP, which has for long been looking for a breakthrough in one of the Telugu states.

ANI

–Sandeep Unnithan with Kiran D. Tare, Amitabh Srivastava, Ashish Misra and Amarnath K. Menon

DALIT VOTERS

PUNJAB'S D-FACTOR

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

With the assembly election in Punjab due in February next year, political parties and pollsters, veteran leaders and wannabes are all busy sussing out possibilities. On June 12, at a political event in Chandigarh, Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) chief Sukhbir Badal announced the revival of his party's old alliance with Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The announcement came on the heels of a promise that if it were voted to power, the SAD would pick a Dalit deputy chief minister. Evidently, Badal hopes these manoeuvres will help swing the Dalit vote towards his party and make up for possible deficits on account of breaking up with the BJP.

This development has also pleased SAD hardliners. Following the parting of ways with the BJP over the Centre's farm laws, Sukhbir has been pushing a narrative of the SAD returning to its former panthic agenda, aimed at minimising his political losses among rural farmers and religiously-inclined voters. In this regard, there are questions about how useful the crisis-ridden Punjab unit of the BSP will be. It has remained a second-rung power in the state over the past 25 years, never winning more than five per cent of the vote. In fact, it has been reduced to something of a poaching ground for larger parties, besides being a springboard for BSP leaders to find their fortunes in other parties. The trend began with the BSP's then-top man in Punjab, Satnam Kainth, and current minister Charanjit Channi joining the Congress before the 2002 assembly election. Later, Sukhbir poached several of its leaders, including Pawan Kumar Tinu, Avinash Chander and Des Raj Dhugga. Even the BJP gained, winning over a portion of Dalit cadres in the Doaba districts.

Most SAD members recognise that the BSP is a spent force in Punjab, and does not command a lot of influence among the state's Dalit groups. Ashutosh Kumar, who teaches political science at the Panjab University, says he doubts the BSP will be able to effectively transfer votes to SAD candidates. "The BSP's influence is limited to some seats in Punjab's Doaba region," he says. "It does not have cadres among all Dalit groups and it has limited appeal among non-Dalits." This, some say, explains Parkash Singh's Badal's insistence on maintaining an alliance with the BJP following the 1996 Lok Sabha election—he had noted that the BJP was far more effective than other parties when it came to transferring votes to electoral partners. Further weakening its viability as a partner, the BSP also has almost no influence among the Mazhabi Sikhs, a third of Punjab's Dalits.

The optics of being 'Dalit-friendly' has become an important consideration for political parties in Punjab. Even the Congress is said to be considering a Dalit deputy chief minister—a reconciliation committee under Rajya Sabha MP Mallikarjun Kharge, the party's in-charge of Punjab affairs Harish Rawat and veteran J.P. Aggarwal recommended this to party chief Sonia Gandhi on June 12. The names being considered are minister Charanjit Singh Channi, a Ramdasi Dalit, and Raj Kumar Verka, a Valmiki leader and loyalist of the CM.

As the farm agitation has continued in Punjab, there has also been a counter-mobilisation among Dalits and other communities against the

dominant Jatt Sikhs. As a group, Jatt Sikhs make up only 18 per cent of the electorate, but they are massively influential. All the state's chief ministers—except Giani Zail Singh from 1972-77—have come from this community. "At present, Dalits are seeking a larger share of power, rather than to replace Jatt Sikhs as the power centre in the state," says Surinder Singh Jodhka, a professor at the JNU's Centre for the Study of Social Systems.

Since its split with the SAD, the BJP has been consolidating voters among two major urban Dalit groups—the Ravidas and Valmiki communities. Together, they make up 37 per cent of the Dalit electorate in Punjab and about 7 per cent each of the state's total electorate. They dominate the Jalandhar, Kapurthala, Nawanshahr and Hoshiarpur districts of Punjab's Doaba region. (The BSP also has a presence in these districts.) Two prominent BJP leaders—Union minister Som Prakash and the recently appointed National SC Commission chairperson Vijay Sampla—belong to the Ravidas community and come from the same region. Similarly, the Sufi singer-turned-parliamentarian from North Delhi Hans Raj Hans belongs to Jalandhar's Valmiki community and has been stationed there since the farmer protests began. In terms of outreach, over the past six months, RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) members have visited more than 7,000 of Punjab's 12,500 villages seeking donations for the construction of the Ram teMandir at Ayodhya. Many of these visits have been to Dalit communities.

PHOTO CREDIT

NEW BEGINNINGS SAD chief Sukhbir Badal (centre right) with BSP national general secretary Satish Chandra Mishra in Chandigarh, on June 12

The Ravidas and Valmiki communities make up 7% each of the electorate. Mazhabi Sikhs add another 10%. These three Dalit groups account for just under 25% of the eligible voters in the state

A community that Badal will have to make nice with is the Mazhabi Sikhs, who are unhappy with both the Congress and the SAD. This group makes up more than 10 per cent of the electorate, yet there are no parliamentarians or ministers in the state cabinet from its ranks. Mazhabi Sikhs are also displeased with the SAD over the alleged targeting of some members of their community—like Dera Sachcha Sauda followers—by the SGPC (Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee) following the sacrilegious incidents involving the Guru Granth Sahib in 2015. They are are also caught up in the larger Dalit struggle for commercial power. In Punjab, Jatt Sikhs own over 93 per cent of agricultural land, while Dalits own only three per cent. Mazhabis also often work as farm labourers in Punjab's southwestern districts (Bathinda, Faridkot, Patiala and others)—which are the hotbeds of the farmer union protests.

The past two decades have seen a struggle between these two communities over agricultural land and land-grab of Dalit property. Since 2009, the Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee (Land Rights Struggle Committee), an informal left-wing organisation, has been mobilising Dalit communities through village-level committees to take up the tilling of panchayat land. Thousands have participated in land rights movements across southern Punjab, upsetting old power equations between Jatt Sikh farmers and Dalit labourers. Until now, Jatt Sikh farmers had continued to cultivate "panchayat land" by sponsoring proxy Dalit candidates, creating resentment among the more deserving. In the previous assembly poll, this community largely voted either for the Congress or the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

Dalit communities, which constitute 31.8 per cent of the state's electorate, have also protested against the Congress government for allegedly mishandling a spurious liquor case involving 120 deaths. They are also unhappy with the allegations of corruption against cabinet minister Sadhu Singh Dharamsot in a scholarships programme for SC students, and for the government's "silent support" to evangelist Christian groups who they allege are converting Dalit Sikhs in Punjab's Gurdaspur, Amritsar and Tarn Taran districts.

In his bid to build bridges with Dalit pressure groups, Badal will also have to compete with AAP in Punjab's southwestern pockets to become the principal opponent to the Congress. And though he says his party now represents all religions and castes, the SAD's drift towards a more hardline agenda, and its new alliance with the BSP, could end up alienating upper caste Hindu and moderate Sikh voters. Traditionally, the SAD leadership has supported Jatt Sikhs, though it has also fought the Congress for Dalit votes. Badal's new alliance with the BSP, running precisely counter to that, is a gamble that could end up entirely destabilising his party's political calculations. ■

AIADMK

A TRIANGULAR POWER TUSSLE

By Amarnath K. Menon

PHOTO CREDIT

Differences between top leaders of the AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) have been sharpening ever since the party's assembly election debacle in April. In a series of recent moves, former chief minister E.K. Palaniswami (EPS) has sought to tighten his hold on the party. For one, he has ensured that several numerically and electorally significant communities of Tamil Nadu are represented in the AIADMK legislature party executive. On June 14, he also got one of his loyalists, former minister S.P. Velumani, appointed as the party whip in the assembly—a post EPS's rival O. Panneerselvam (OPS) had been eyeing for his camp. EPS, who is the leader of the 66-member AIADMK legislature party, also succeeded in getting OPS to settle for the post of deputy leader of the legislature party.

Analysts say that with these appointments, EPS, 67, has gained an upper hand and forced OPS to play second fiddle. The 70-year-old OPS is peeved about being denied the opportunity to be leader of the opposition. Unlike EPS, who was chief minister for over four years since February 2017, he has had only brief stints as stand-in CM. Appointed to the post after J. Jayalalithaa's death in December 2016, OPS feels he should have been allowed to continue rather than pave the way for EPS.

Anti-EPS posters had sprung up in parts of Tamil Nadu ahead of the June 14 election of the deputy leader of the legislature party even as OPS, keen to show his clout, signalled that he was not keen on functioning as EPS's deputy. However, he appears to have backed off from presenting himself as a strong challenger for now.

SASIKALA'S SHADOW

Adding to the AIADMK's woes is V.K. Sasikala, who is looking to find her place back in the party. Sasikala lost a potential opportunity to become chief minister after she was convicted in a disproportionate assets case and handed a four-year jail sentence in February 2017. Released from prison this January, the 66-year-old politician will be eager to cover lost ground. Sasikala, who worked as a close aide of Jayalalithaa, has released 30-odd audio tapes of her purported conversations with AIADMK workers, in which she assures them of her comeback to play a leading role in the party.

Many in the AIADMK, particularly EPS backers, are vehemently opposed to Sasikala re-emerging as a power centre. OPS, though, could be more willing to yield, being a fellow member of her Mukkulathor community. Sasikala would be looking to exploit the EPS-OPS tensions to try and gain control of the party. Apprehensive of this, the EPS and OPS factions closed ranks to expel 16 Sasikala sympathisers from the AIADMK on June 14. They include party spokesperson V. Pugazhendhi, former minister M. Anandan and former MP V.K. Chinnasamy. "The party, as a formidable force, will not fall for the aspirations of a family (Sasikala and her nephew T.T.V. Dhinakaran)," the AIADMK said in a strongly worded statement. The statement said those who had grown as "toxic weeds" were trying to usurp the party. The June 14 meeting also deplored Sasikala's "attempts to capture" the party and her bid to reach out to certain members.

AIADMK insiders believe Sasikala could well be behind the anti-EPS posters to further stoke the rift between him and OPS. They are apprehensive that Sasikala-inspired dissidents will grow silently and manifold within a year, though taking control of the party will be far from easy. "Sasikala has little or no chance to revive her hold in the near future. OPS has shown he is not up to a good fight, so she would not want to team up with him. She will also have to wait for the pending Delhi High Court case on the AIADMK leadership, which will inevitably go to the Supreme Court," says political commentator N. Sathiya Moorthy.

THE CONTENDERS
E.K. Palaniswami (right) and O. Panneerselvam at the release of the AIADMK poll manifesto in March 2021; (below) V.K. Sasikala

PHOTO CREDIT

SHAKY FUTURE

The AIADMK, which along with allies won only 75 seats in the 234-member Tamil Nadu assembly, has a long way to go before it can hope to regain voters' confidence. Analysts say infighting could ruin the party's prospects in the municipal elections, which are likely to be held once the current pandemic wave abates. A lot will depend on whether the party fares better in the state's western parts—EPS's stronghold—or the southern areas, where OPS wields clout.

Another grim prospect is facing corruption cases and possible prosecutions and arrests. Three months before the April 6 assembly election, the DMK had submitted to Governor Banwarilal Purohit a long list of corruption charges against the AIADMK government and several of its ministers. As chief minister, M.K. Stalin is likely to keep up the pressure. "If M.K. Stalin were to moderate the pace of his follow-up action after coming to power, people will view him sceptically. It won't be good for his or the DMK's credibility," says Moorthy.

Legal action against former ministers and other middle-rung AIADMK leaders also threatens to tear apart the façade of unity being presented by EPS and OPS. Sasikala will try to capitalise on this. Meanwhile, dissent against EPS continues to grow. Comparing EPS with Idi Amin, the former Ugandan president infamous for the brutality of his regime, Pugazhendhi says: "EPS is treating everyone like a slave. I will reveal more things in due course."

With the EPS and OPS camps at loggerheads and Sasikala waiting to take advantage, the AIADMK is staring at a tumultuous phase ahead. "Neither EPS nor OPS, it seems, will be able to unite and lead the AIADMK, even in the 2026 assembly election. The party needs a new leader or a new mantra," says Ramu Manivannan, head of the department of politics and public administration at the University of Madras. At the moment, that looks like a tall order. ■

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WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

How to Win over the Biggest Votebank

By Amitabh Srivastava

On June 2, Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar announced 33 per cent reservations for women in the state's medical and engineering colleges, marking another watershed in his determined push to empower women in a state where patriarchal mores have held sway. Women already account for a third of these seats, and with these reservations will most likely outnumber the men in Bihar's technical campuses.

This will be quite a feat for a state where female literacy is just 60.5 per cent (against the national average of 70.3 per cent), according to a 2018 ministry of statistics and programme implementation survey, and where over a thousand cases of dowry deaths are reported every year—1,127 in 2019, according to an NCRB report. Two days after the technical institutions move, the chief minister asked the police brass to ensure that all the 850-odd police stations in Bihar had adequate women police officers. Women cops now make up 25.3 per cent of the force in Bihar (35 per cent posts are reserved for them).

In February, when deputy CM Tar Kishore Prasad of the BJP presented the 2021-22 budget, it was announced that unmarried girl students would get a cash award of Rs 25,000 for clearing the intermediate exams and Rs 50,000 after a bachelor's degree. "These measures will encourage parents to send their girls for higher education, and also curb underage marriages. The social impact will be path-breaking," says Tar Kishore.

Dr Nawal Kishore Choudhary, former head of the department of economics, Patna University, says "these steps also make political sense, as women now play a key role in the electoral battlefield. But it's not all about politics, the pro-women measures have led to them becoming more assertive, forthcoming and participative in almost all fields of activity in Bihar". However, Choudhary points out, Nitish has not shown a similar resolve to encourage and empower women leaders—the JD(U) has just one woman among its 16 Lok Sabha MPs. The party fielded 22 women candidates in last year's assembly poll (six of whom won).

Nitish watchers say his push for gender equality stems from a deeply held conviction and has been a long practice. Way back in 2006, just two months into his first term as chief minister, he had announced 50 per cent reservation ifor women n panchayat seats. The decision was criticised by male satraps as yet another example of women being used as rubber stamps, but it has over the years led to a churn and upended traditional hegemonies in Bihar's outback.

The other big move for women's empowerment was the distribution of free clothes, books and cycles for schoolgoing girls, which led to a big jump in school enrolments. So much so, girls now outnumber boys in Class 6 and above, says Sanjay Kumar, additional chief secretary, education. He cites the 'cycle yojana', where every girl gets a cycle when she reaches Class 9, as the most important scheme to get them to schools. It is also believed to have led to the increase in the number of girl students taking Class 10 exams—up from 180,000 in 2005 to 822,000 in 2019.

The focus on women-centric schemes and their empowerment has led to rich rewards for CMs. Nitish Kumar seems to have benefitted most from this

From clamping prohibition in 2016 to helping set up over 1 million self-help groups (SHGs) to giving women 35 per cent reservation in government jobs, Nitish has been quite relentless in pressing for gender parity.

Of course, there are other chief ministers who have held this conviction and done as well or more for women in their states, none more so than Naveen Patnaik in Odisha and Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal. Patnaik's pro-reservation measures and 'Mission Shakti' for women have been studied and copied by many. And then there's Arvind Kejriwal in Delhi, who is credited for making bus rides free for women, and having CCTV cameras installed across the capital for their safety.

As for Mamata, she has always had a soft corner for women. In the recent assembly election, her party, the

LADIES FIRST
CM Nitish Kumar with women party leaders at the JD(U) office in Patna

SONU KISHAN

WOMEN ON TOP

BIHAR

50% seats reserved in panchayats

35% (+3% for EBCs) quotas in govt jobs

10.7% Strength in assembly with 26 MLAs

33% reservation for women in medical/ engineering colleges

ODISHA

50% reservation in local bodies and panchayats

33% seats in 2019 LS poll reserved by BJD

10.2% Strength in assembly with 15 MLAs

8 million women involved in SHGs as part of Mission Shakti

WEST BENGAL

50% quota in local bodies

50% reservation in govt jobs (claimed)

13.6% Strength in assembly with 40 MLAs

41% of TMC candidates for LS 2019 polls were women

Trinamool Congress (TMC), fielded 50 women candidates. Of these, 33 won and eight have got ministerial berths in the cabinet. Mamata has always known the worth of women-centric welfarism, no doubt also prompted by the knowledge that women make up 48.5 per cent of Bengal's electorate.

Mamata rejigged many government schemes and reissued benefits in the name of the family matriarch. The zero-premium Rs 5 lakh cover health insurance scheme for families, Swasthyasathi, is not just issued in the name of the matriarch, it covers her parents as well as her in-laws. It's seen as a big step towards empowering women in rural households.

Mamata has also announced a basic monthly income for 16 million women from poor households. Calling it Lokkhir Bhandar or pocket money, she's distributing Rs 500-1,000 to the bank accounts of women from the general castes and the SC/ ST communities.

There are several other schemes exclusively for girls—Kanyashree, a stipend for higher studies, from Class 8 through college and university; Roopashree, which gives financial assistance to women at the time of marriage; Saboojsathi, which provides bicycles for the girl child to go to schools. Some of these schemes have now been recognised internationally as major steps towards empowering women, stopping child marriage, trafficking and helping them lead a life of dignity.

Back in Bihar, Nitish has taken many gender-sensitive initiatives, and also reaped rich electoral benefits with his women's empowerment schemes. He has now ordered quotas to be proportionately reflected in the regional administration as well. This effectively means that every police station, sub-divisional headquarters, district office, corporation and commission in the state will have women in at least 35 per cent of the posts. It promises to transform the state government's offices radically. As one government officer put it, "In times to come, when you call out 'Madam' in any government office, a response will come from all corners."

Nitish benefitted much from his pro-women tilt in the 2020 assembly election when pre-poll surveys had all but written him off. On November 5, 2020, the last day of campaigning, Nitish had made a desperate plea to the women in the crowd: "*Aap hi ke liye to sabse jyada kaam kiya hai...parso subah pahle vote de dijiyega* (I have worked for you the most, please go out and vote day after tomorrow)."

Three days later, the Election Commission figures revealed the turnout of women voters (65.5 per cent) in the last phase of elections was a good 10 percentage points higher than men (54.9 per cent). Just before the polls, an INDIA TODAY Lokniti-CSDS opinion poll had observed that it was the women who were keeping the NDA afloat in Bihar: some 41 per cent women were found to be voting for the Nitish-led NDA against 31 for the RJD-led grand alliance and 28 for others. It proved to be true—Bihar's women backed him again for a fourth consecutive term, rich reward for the JD(U) chief's efforts to improve their lot. ■

with Romita Datta

THE PERILS OF LONG COVID

Doctors warn of the dangers of a lingering post-Covid syndrome that puts patients at risk long after the virus has left their body

BY SONALI ACHARJEE

Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

IN the beginning of April, Covid came knocking for the Bhatias, a family of five, who live in Bengaluru's Banaswadi neighbourhood. The second wave had yet to assume its brutal proportions; most of the family, including two teenagers aged 18 and 17, got away with cold and fever, their recovery made easier with a five-day course of antibiotics and vitamin supplements. Only their 70-year-old grandmother had to be given steroids, to douse the internal inflammation.

Relieved that they had survived the worst, the Bhatias resumed their normal routine as soon as the symptoms subsided—only to have the nightmare return in two weeks. "My mother was diagnosed with Parkinson's," says Abhishek Bhatia, 45, a manager at a software engineering firm. "A blood clot had possibly travelled to her brain. She hadn't been given anti-coagulants during treatment." Chronic fatigue and bodyache prevented his wife from resuming her duties in the kitchen. The children complained of 'brain fog', unable to focus or think clearly. Bhatia himself reported low-grade fever for six days after he tested negative, indicating internal inflammation, and was later found to have blood clots in one hand. "It has been two months since we tested negative, but none of us has the energy to live like we used to," he says.

The unpredictability of Covid symptoms continues to baffle experts and patients alike. In general, such symptoms include body or muscle ache, fatigue, headache, loss of smell or taste and breathlessness. Over the past year and a half, enough data has been collected to confirm that a majority of Covid survivors experience one or

more of these symptoms even after 14 days (the average time it takes for the body to fight off the virus). Of the 9,751 patients it surveyed worldwide in May 2021, the Stanford University School of Medicine found that 70 per cent of those who had suffered moderate or severe infection reported 84 different symptoms months after recovery.

The situation isn't any better for those with mild symptoms. A study by the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, or *JAMA*, in Sweden in May 2021 showed that one out of 10 people with mild Covid infection was unable to fully resume their normal daily activities even eight months after recovery. On an average, patients experienced symptoms for at least three weeks. "It is not only those hospitalised for Covid who feel its after-effects," says Dr Farah Ingale, an internal medicine specialist at Fortis Hospital in Hiranandani, Mumbai. "I have patients who were treated at home for fever and cough and have severe joint aches even four months after the initial symptoms receded. I have also had patients who had no symptoms for the first two weeks, and later developed severe fatigue and gastrointestinal symptoms. Since they had tested positive just two weeks before, one can only assume their symptoms were due to the virus."

WHAT IS LONG COVID?

"We still do not entirely know the short- and long-term impact of the virus on the body," says N.K. Arora, head of the operations research group of the ICMR's (Indian Council of Medical Research) national task force for Covid. "But we do know that patients may develop new symptoms even six months to a year after recovery. This is known as Long Covid." According to ICMR, if a person has symptoms four to 12 weeks after testing negative for Covid, it should be treated as post-Covid Syndrome or PCS. "If after 12 weeks, symptoms continue or reappear, the patient should go for an RT-PCR test. If positive, they are deemed reinfected with Covid. But if negative, it should be treated as Long Covid," says Dr Randeep Guleria, director of the All India Institute of Sciences (AIIMS) in Delhi. A majority of the second round of symptoms, according to most doctors, begin four weeks after the onset of the first symptoms. Not all symptoms indicate serious underlying conditions but, left untreated and undiagnosed, can lead to

"When people show new symptoms six months to a year after Covid recovery, it is treated as Long Covid"

N.K. ARORA

Head, Operations Research Group, National Covid Task Force, ICMR

Malaika Arora, 47

Model-actress, yoga enthusiast

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

medical problems in the short or long run.

Long Covid has made its presence felt in other countries too. In the US, for example, a study looking at two million Covid-19 patients found that 250,000 of them had sought treatment for PCS even a month after recovery. Many of them had had a mild or asymptomatic run. The most common new problem reported was pain, including in the nerves and muscles, along with breathing difficulties, high cholesterol, fatigue, high blood pressure and parosmia (a distortion of the senses of smell and taste).

In the absence of national data on PCS, or the symptoms and risk factors, one has to rely on the testimonies of doctors across Covid wards in the country. And they present a grim picture. "We have seen a very high percentage of patients developing PCS," says Dr Vivek Nangia, a pulmonologist at the Max Super Specialty Hospital in Delhi. "Most of them complain of persisting bodyache, fatigue, breathlessness, anxiety, voice changes, even memory lapses." At the Rajiv Gandhi Super Specialty Hospital in Delhi, director Dr B.L. Sherwal says that 80-90 per cent of their patients complain of a dry cough, weakness and the tendency to get dehydrated very quickly post recovery. "Many cannot do simple activities like walking from one room to the other in the house."

> **"Inflammation of the heart muscle during Covid can loosen arterial plaque and increase risk of thrombosis. Blood clots can fully clog the artery and trigger a heart attack"**
>
> **DR RAJEEV RATHI**
> *Cardiologist, Max Hospital, Delhi*

With the B.1.617.1 and B.1.617.2 lineages of the new Delta variant dominating the second wave, experts have noticed a change in PCS symptoms too, though any direct correlation has yet to be scientifically ascertained. "Brain fog is much more common this time," says Dr Sherwal. Other Covid survivors complain of persistent low-grade fever.

To better understand PCS, experts recommend dividing patients into two categories—those with mild to moderate Covid (who recovered at home with or without significant medical intervention) and those whose affliction was severe (who were hospitalised, admitted into an ICU, put on a ventilator, and/ or given steroids). The risk of PCS, they say, can be different in both groups. "For mild patients, the symptoms

My Covid Story

"IT TOOK ME 32 WEEKS TO WORK OUT THE WAY I USED TO"

When I tested positive in September 2020, I assumed my case would be similar to the many asymptomatic ones I had seen. However, it took 22 days for me to test negative. They were the most trying days. I could feel myself deteriorating from a combination of both the virus and the medication. I didn't even have the energy to do breathing exercises. I would do five counts and be 'Oh lord, I am done'. I just ate and slept.

When I finally tested negative, I genuinely thought I could do it all. I went out for a run and that's when it hit me—recovery is not going to happen overnight. I felt immense pain in my joints and gasped for breath. On the 25th day, I resumed shooting for the (Sony show) *India's Best Dancer*. It was exhausting. I didn't have the energy to perform for the finale, but I persevered. Rehearsals took longer and I could only practise for 30-45 minutes at a time.

I resumed yoga after I finished shooting, and Sarvesh [Shashi, instructor and founder of yoga app Sarva] faithfully worked out with me, but even he could see I was struggling.

Until December, I could barely do anything. I experienced hair loss, joint pain, breathlessness and disturbed sleep. My nutritionist, Dr Vishakha Shivdasani, told me that I'm not alone and many are in a similar predicament. When I recently shared on Instagram that it took me 32 weeks to get back to my pre-Covid yoga routine, many reached out to say that they went through something similar. I started properly working out only in January. The post-Covid struggle is real. Do not neglect it.

—As told to Suhani Singh

are not life-threatening. But for severe cases, thrombosis and inflammation can prove fatal," says Dr Sherwal.

THE SILENT KILLERS

Inflammation and thrombosis are among the two very important pathogenic mechanisms of Covid. Inflammation is a natural process through which the body fights off harmful infection or injury. When the immune system senses damage to a cell in the body, it releases chemicals to resist the invasion. When these chemicals continue to linger, triggering what is recognised as a cytokine storm, inflammation can harm other healthy tissues and organs. It manifests most commonly in a fever, but c-reactive protein (CRP) levels in the blood can also reveal the extent of internal inflammation. "A variety of organs can be involved in the inflammatory cascade of Covid-19. Inflammation can indicate lung pneumonia or damage to the kidney and liver," says Dr Nangia. Inflammation-related problems are commonly seen in people with underlying comorbidities, and in elders whose immune system may be suppressed because of history of past disease or medication.

Thrombosis, on the other hand, refers to the blood's tendency to clot in the presence of a foreign substance. Appearing either in the veins or in the arteries, these clots, if not dissolved in time with medication, can trigger pulmonary thrombosis, cardiac events, strokes or kidney damage. "We have even seen patients with clots in their hands and legs," says Dr Nangia. Among those more prone to thrombosis are the bed-ridden, people with cancer, the elderly, or those with a past history of thrombosis or thrombophilia. As Abhishek Bhatia, who developed a clot in his hand, said, "We never knew we had a history of thrombosis in the family; it was found through tests only after Covid."

What makes inflammation and thrombosis truly dangerous is their silent explosion in the body. Left untreated and unsupervised, they can result in organ injury even in Covid patients who did not have to be hospitalised because their oxygen levels had remained stable.

According to doctors, while one knows that clots can damage organs, it is difficult to predict whether post-Covid thrombosis can be a cause of death in itself. "It has been recorded in theory," says Dr Atul Ingale, a nephrologist at the Fortis Hospital in Mumbai. "But we need more practical evidence for it."

"Covid-induced lung inflammation can cause fibrosis, scarring lung tissue. With no exchange of gases, people get breathless"

DR VIVEK NANGIA
Pulmonologist, Max Hospital, Delhi

RISK TO LUNGS AND HEART

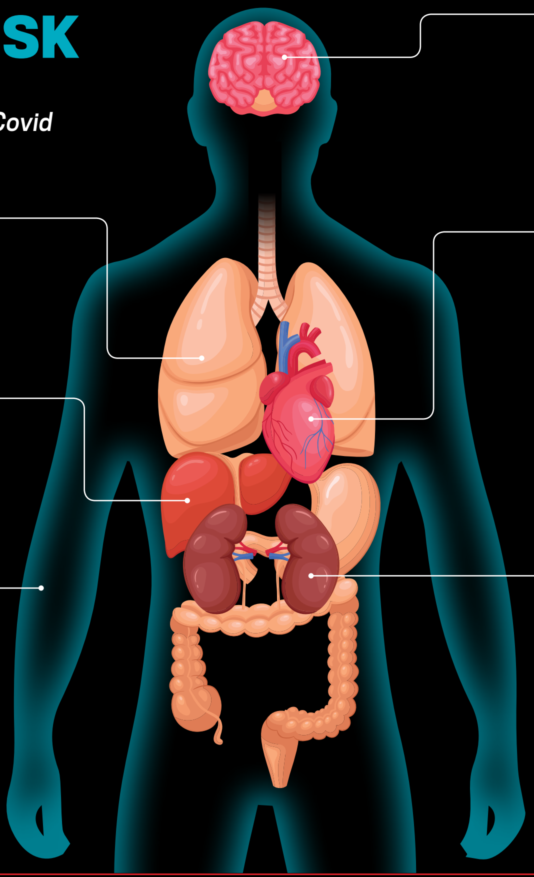
When 39-year-old Manik Biswas, a travel agent in Pune, died of a sudden heart attack on May 2, his family just couldn't believe it. Manik and his wife Kritika had recovered from Covid 24 days ago. The couple, who liked to cycle together every morning, had resumed their "normal" routine a week after their Covid symptoms subsided. "We felt fine, and didn't think of further monitoring our health," says Kritika. Both had been treated for the disease at home, but the use of steroids and Covid-induced internal inflammation put Manik in the high-risk category for post-Covid complications. "The acute inflammation during his infection 'loosened' some plaque in an artery, which led to a blood clot and then a heart attack," says Kritika.

Though numbers are hard to come by, there have been several instances of young Covid survivors succumbing to sudden heart attacks after recovery. All of us acquire some measure of arterial blockage as we age, but till such blockage exceeds 50-70 per cent, we don't feel any symptoms and are, therefore, unaware of the risks. But, according to research, Covid puts pressure on the heart muscles. Two German studies published in the July 2020 issue of *JAMA Cardiology* showed abnormal heart imaging findings in 78 per cent of the 57 Covid-19 patients they observed. A majority of them had ongoing cardiac inflammation even weeks after recovery. Dr Rajeev Rathi, cardiologist and director of the transradial interventional programme at the Max Hospital in Saket, Delhi, explains: "The moment the virus enters the body, it starts an inflammatory reaction in almost all the organs. The heart too has the ACE2 receptor, the protein the virus hooks onto to gain entry into the body, and so patients have a chance of the heart muscles getting inflamed."

There is already evidence of viral infections having a negative impact on the heart. A *JAMA Cardiology* study of the 2019-20 flu season found that the virus affected the heart health of 94 per cent of the patients under study. The most commonly noted cardiac events were low ejection fraction (when the heart cannot pump enough blood, often indicating a heart failure), and blocked arteries triggering sudden heart attacks. "There is increased incidence of cardiac problems in those with Covid infection. Viral infection leads to instability in the coronary tree. Most people do not know how much blockage they already have in their hearts because some plaque formation is natural and does not affect people unless it

ORGANS AT RISK

Parts of the body that may remain affected long after recovery from Covid



LUNGS

Temporary fibrosis or possible scarring of lung tissue, causing post-Covid breathlessness

LIVER

Injury to the heart, thrombosis or internal inflammation can reflect in abnormal liver function test

MUSCLES

Joint and muscle pain commonly reported as the body takes time to recover from Covid-induced inflammation

BRAIN

Clots travelling to the brain can cause stroke, neurological disorders; patients with mild Covid may report brain fog and loss of smell and taste

HEART

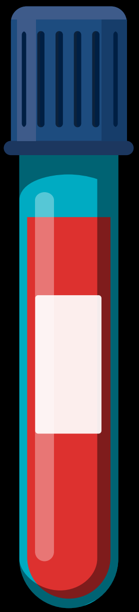
Inflammation of cardiac muscle can cause arterial plaque to become unstable, potentially harming long-term heart health, and culminating in low ejection fraction or sudden heart attack; clots travelling to the heart can block arteries, precipitating a cardiac arrest

KIDNEY

Covid found in kidney tissue itself can be indicative of damage to the kidney cells; poor fluid intake during Covid may result in acute injury to the kidneys

TEST CASE

Based on the severity of Covid, these tests can be done weekly or monthly; monitoring basic parameters can help detect any ongoing health concerns. Consulting a doctor is important to interpret test results



C-REACTIVE PROTEIN BLOOD TEST

Assesses if there is serious internal inflammation

D-DIMER BLOOD TEST

Indicates if there is a possibility of blood thrombosis or clots

COMPLETE BLOOD COUNT

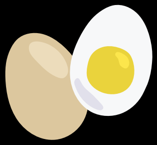
Helps detect any secondary infections or blood thrombosis

LIVER AND KIDNEY HEALTH

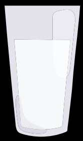
Blood investigations can rule out injury to either organ

MENU FOR RECOVERY

How to manage your nutrition after Covid



PROTEIN: Adequate protein intake helps overcome Long Covid-induced weakness. No need to run for supplements; natural animal or plant protein in the form of lentils, paneer, tofu, etc. can compensate any need for supplements. One gram of protein is recommended per kilo of body weight. Too much protein can put stress on the kidney.



CALCIUM: Helps reduce weakness and joint pain. Besides milk, curd, paneer and other dairy, one tsp of sesame seeds soaked overnight can help improve calcium assimilation

IRON: Helps keep haemoglobin levels up. Patients should have five portions of all seasonal fruit daily. One portion is about 50-75 gm of fruit.

DRY FRUITS: Patients with post-Covid sugar cravings can eat dry fruits and nuts for energy and to satiate cravings. Avoid excessive white sugar and processed food.

ADEQUATE LIQUID INTAKE: Soup, fresh juice, and water are important to ensure hydration.

–Inputs by Dr Megha Jaina, clinical nutritionist, Max Hospital, Delhi

Graphics by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

becomes severe. But when Covid strikes, these plaques can rupture because of inflammation in the heart muscles. The rupture happens within the lumen (the inside of the artery) itself, which increases the chances of thrombosis. When clots form, then the artery with the rupture can find itself blocked 100 per cent, triggering a heart attack," Dr Rathi elaborates. A D-Dimer blood test can help monitor the inflammation and chances of thrombosis. "D-Dimer," explains Dr Rathi, "is a parameter that suggests high chances of blood coagulability, or if the patient is at a higher risk of clotting complications. Covid patients who needed oxygen, steroids and hospitalisation for treatment need to check clotting chances."

What is still unknown, though, is for just how long a recovered patient remains at risk of developing heart complications. "We still don't know about long-term cardiac health after Covid recovery," says Dr Rathi. "Unstable plaques can behave differently over a period of one or two months. A heart attack does not necessarily occur during hospitalisation. If the plaque is unstable and patients quickly jump back into intense physical activity after Covid, the risk goes up." Cardiologists recommend that those recovering from Covid should take it easy irrespective of the severity of the illness. "One can never know what is going on inside your heart, so it is better not to exert yourself unduly. Rest for a few months and gradually increase your activity level. Long Covid symptoms for the heart can be silent at times, but if you take it for granted, it can also be fatal," says Dr Rajiv Passey, cardiologist at the Sir Ganga Ram Hospital in Delhi.

The effects of Covid on the lungs before and after the infection could be completely different. During Covid, patients are at the risk of developing pneumonia and hypoxia. After Covid, patients can get permanent fibrosis of the lungs, pulmonary embolism (clots in the lung tissue) and long-term breathlessness. A May 2021 study in the *European Respiratory Journal* showed that 14 per cent of the patients under study were at the risk of pulmonary embolism at the time of hospital admission itself. "Clotting is a major concern after recovery; it puts all vital organs at risk," says Dr Nangia. While most hospitalised patients with lung infection recover well, some, he adds, show slow recovery; others can even relapse. "There are cases where the infection in the lung can return, leading to inflammation (also referred to as a ground glassing effect). Such people can potentially develop fibrosis, which is a scarring of the lung in which normal breathing lung space gets converted into dead tissue. There is no exchange of gases in that tissue then, leaving people breathless as they don't get enough oxygen in the lungs," says Dr Nangia.

"Chronic kidney disease compromises the immune system anyway. Covid raises the risk, especially in transplant patients"

DR ATUL INGALE
Nephrologist, Fortis, Mumbai

People above the age of 60, smokers, alcoholics, and those with a prolonged hospital, ICU or ventilator stay are more prone to developing lung fibrosis. These patients will require oxygen support often for months after recovery. "I have patients who need oxygen at home for 2-3 months. Some cannot take a flight of steps or walk for more than 10 minutes at a go even six months after recovery," says Dr Abhuday Dasgupta, a pulmonologist in Kolkata.

Lung fibrosis can be a permanent problem for many Covid survivors. Classifying them into two types, Dr Rajesh Chawla, a pulmonologist at the Apollo Hospital

My Covid Story

"I FEEL LIKE COVID HAS EATEN UP ALL MY STRENGTH"

Bhumi Pednekar, 31
Actress

My Covid journey was not easy. The first nine days were horrible. My fever persisted, I was extremely tired and my body ached—my skin, nails, even eyelashes, hurt. My mother, who had developed fibrosis in her lungs, had to be hospitalised for 10 days. It was a very unnerving period and it left me feeling alienated and helpless. I knew that this time around, rather than just donate money, I had to do something more. So, I started using my Twitter handle to help people get access to medical resources. But starting this just after testing negative meant that there was a constant feeling of fatigue and I couldn't engage in long conversations.

My face was reflecting the immense physical

I'LL BE THERE FOR YOU

stress my body had gone through. It was heart-breaking. You work so hard on your well-being. I resumed working out only two weeks ago—a month after testing negative—and my cardio stamina just isn't the same. I feel like Covid has eaten up all my strength. I have been told by my doctor and my trainer that Covid recovery is 'a process' and I have to take it a little easy.

I hope to be back on track by July. I definitely feel anxious about resuming work, especially since I'm not vaccinated, but you have to brave it and follow maximum Covid safety protocol because, ultimately, we all have to put food on the table. I have lost three close family members to Covid and seen my aunt battle a severe case. What I do know is that now I will step out only for work.

–As told to Suhani Singh

in Delhi, says, "One is immediate post-Covid fibrosis, which usually resolves on its own. But some people may develop permanent and irreversible fibrosis. However, it is too soon to tell since it has only been a year and a half of Covid." As for those who experienced severe Covid infection in the lungs, experts say that only time will tell how long their Long Covid will last.

IMPACT ON OTHER ORGANS

Besides the heart and lungs, the brain and kidneys are the two other vital organs at risk from Long Covid. Blood clots travelling to both these organs have been found in the post-mortems of several patients. "Patients shouldn't get alarmed by any symptom, but they should also not be in denial. Any symptom such as fever, fatigue, bodyache, breathlessness, or anything else where you feel your body isn't functioning as it used to or anything that causes distress to your daily movement, should be reported, investigated and treated," says Dr Ingale. Strokes and brain fog are being associated with Long Covid. However, according to doctors, brain fog, where people find it difficult to think clearly for a prolonged period of time, is temporary. Only in rare cases, where people have a predisposition to Parkinson's or other neurological disorders, can Covid lead to their onset.

Patients with chronic kidney disease or CKD are another risk group for Long Covid. With hypertension and diabetes patients more prone to CKD, they are likely to have a longer hospital stay in case of Covid. "CKD compromises your immune system," says Dr Ingale. "The risk is even higher for those who have had kidney transplants."

Covid can also lead to acute kidney injury, a condition that requires treatment long after the viral symptoms have eased up. "Dehydration in Covid patients causes pre-renal injury," explains Dr Ingale. "But they recover fast post hydration. Covid-19 is also a precursor to sepsis such as cytokine storms. During this condition, a person can develop acute tubular necrosis or kidney injury. For this category, the recovery is variable, it may not be a hundred per cent and it can take anywhere between two weeks and three months.

My Covid Story

"I GET EXHAUSETED EVEN WHILE READING THE NEWSPAPER"

Raza Haider, 50
Documentary filmmaker

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

I tested positive for Covid two months ago and was hospitalised after my oxygen levels fell due to early-stage fibrosis. But I responded well to the medication, largely steroids, and returned home within a few days. Gradually, the drugs I was on were reduced. But I am still experiencing a variety of symptoms. I cannot do any regular activity or office work for an extended period of time—I have to take breaks. My oxygen levels can drop while I am sitting or slouching and I get tired even while reading a newspaper.

I have lost almost 11.5 kilos over the past couple of months since not only has my appetite gone down, but I'm also finding it difficult to eat a high-protein diet. The weight loss has contributed to general fatigue and muscle weakness.

An unexpected symptom is brain fog, which is still happening to me. I think a lot of people get confused between short-term memory loss and brain fog, but since I have experienced both during the course of my illness and recovery, I can tell the difference. With brain fog, I can remember a memory but it is vertical and with no relation to the environment around me. For example, if I am reading a book, I will recollect the book but I won't be able to recollect where I am sitting, who is with me, or if I was eating or drinking something at the time. All my memories are like this. Brain fog also affects my speech at times. For instance, when I am talking, I feel certain words are not coming out, they escape me. Even regular, common words.

This is the worst part about this disease for me, that it didn't end with me testing negative. It is still ongoing.

—As told to Sonali Acharjee

Then there is a third category where patients develop tubulointerstitial nephritis (inflammation in the tubules of the kidney) as a result of certain drugs given for Covid. But if the drugs are stopped in time, then the person recovers well." The virus itself also causes nephron-glomerulopathies (damage caused to blood vessels in the kidney). "In China, the virus was found in kidney tissue after post-mortem. We don't know if this was the cause of death but the presence of the virus in the kidney tissue itself suggests a glomerulopathy," adds Dr Ingale.

As millions recover from Covid's lethal second wave, a national database of post-Covid symptoms as well as more post-mortem studies can help doctors better predict the risk factors and symptoms for Long Covid. As Dr Guleria recommends, "We need a research-backed multi-disciplinary approach towards post-Covid care. The virus does not spare any organ."

"The virus does not spare any organ. We need a research-backed multi-disciplinary approach to post-Covid care"

DR RANDEEP GULERIA
Director, AIIMS, Delhi

Last August, the Rajiv Gandhi Super Speciality Hospital became the first in the country to open an OPD exclusively for patients who had recovered from Covid. The OPD services have continued through the second wave this year. Farooq Mohammad, 48, a cab driver, came all the way from Lucknow to get post-Covid treatment here. "I recovered from Covid at the end of March this year," he says. "Throughout April, I had terrible fatigue and weakness; on some nights, my joints felt as though they would break. But there were very few OPD services available for those who weren't Covid-positive. I didn't need medicines, I needed physiotherapy. I stayed with my family in Delhi while I took physiotherapy for body pain."

"When patients have issues after recovery, it is a crucial time as they need medical care and supervision," says director Dr Sherwal. "Else, even if there is no direct threat to life, Long Covid can reduce the quality of a person's life." Besides blood investigations and personal counselling, physiotherapy for patients with lung fibrosis is much sought-after at the hospital. "Patients with even 10 per cent fibrosis have difficulty breathing," says Dr Sherwal. "We improve their lung capacity through various breathing exercises."

Secondary infections, too, are common among recovered patients and heighten the chances of mortality. The latest ICMR study demonstrates that the mortality is 56.7 per cent higher in those who develop secondary infections post-Covid. Blood and respiratory sites are the most common for such infection. "Covid is one of the most dynamic diseases; it is hard to say how any one individual will respond to it. The challenge, therefore, is while they might recover after 14 days, the underlying damage is very hard to predict," says Dr Sriram Satya, CEO of preventive health at the Apollo Hospital in Chennai.

According to experts, there are three categories of Covid survivors and you will not know which one you fall in until you get tested. The first comprises those who immediately feel better after Covid, whose energies may be on the lower side but whose symptoms have subsided and they can engage in daily tasks. The second includes patients who have prolonged symptoms and for whom even walking at a reasonable pace is difficult; they might also experience brain fog, pain and more intense fatigue. The third category consists of those undergoing physiological change without realising it—rising blood pressure, uncontrolled sugar levels or inflammation.

For patients in the first category, doctors advise regular blood monitoring as a simple precaution. "We have a set of investigations that can be done from home itself, since many patients don't want to come to the hospital even after having had Covid. Based on these, a doctor can advise if further tests are needed," says Dr Satya. Blood tests should cover the liver, kidney, heart, as well as basic metabolic disorders and blood profile. These should be done four to eight weeks after quarantine has ended. "Covid plays such havoc that you want to let the symptoms settle down before investigating long-term damage," she explains. Dr Megha Jaina, a clinical nutritionist with the Max Hospital in Saket, Delhi, says that nutrition plays an enormous role in post-Covid recovery (see *Menu for Recovery*). "For the first time, I am getting patients who aren't interested in weight loss. Now people want to know how food can improve health and mitigate symptoms of Long Covid," she says.

Those in the second and third categories require longer term and systematic rehabilitation. Experts advise that they continue in-person doctor consultations and monitor vital organs. The Apollo Hospital in Chennai has a package for such patients, and has in the past two months received 1,000 requests. While it is still too early to tell the success rate, Dr Satya says, "We are certainly seeing a reduction and control of some symptoms."

The rehabilitation process can take anywhere between

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

Rina Singh, 45

Fashion designer & founder, Eka Core

"COVID HAS BEEN TOUGHER ON MY BODY THAN CHILDBIRTH WAS"

I got Covid in mid-April along with my husband and two children. My viral load was extremely high, probably due to multiple exposure. I started showing symptoms on Day 3 after my vaccination. In fact, my body's reaction to the vaccine over the first two days was worse than the entire period of my Covid infection. On the third day after the jab, I went in to work but had to leave within half an hour after I was told that my son was unwell.

After testing positive, I was put on a cocktail of heavy antibiotics and steroids. And even though the oximeter at home showed no particular dip in SpO2 levels, I experienced palpitations throughout. In hindsight, I feel maybe it was the antibiotics and steroids that did more harm than good, though all my parameters came back clear. It was only on Day 10 that I felt strong enough to take a little walk. I did about 5-10 minutes on the terrace every day after that, but despite a leisurely pace, I would get palpitations. After 14 days, when I stepped out of the house, I managed to walk 200-300 metres in a park before palpitations kicked in again. This continued for another 10 days. I have been a runner all my life, have enjoyed high-intensity workouts and been very particular about my diet.

But even now, after almost two months, I find it difficult to multitask. I can manage an hour-long walk, but am holding off on running more than twice a week till I feel a 100 per cent. My digestion, menstrual cycle and sleep patterns have been in disarray. This has been tougher on my body than childbirth was.

—As told to Chumki Bharadwaj

three and six months, according to most doctors, but depends largely on the severity of Covid symptoms along with a patient's medical history and lifestyle. "Post-Covid wellness is crucial for all patients—to control long-lasting symptoms and to predict any additional risks that may develop after a few weeks," says Dr Satya. Patients who develop lung fibrosis need a pulmonary physiotherapist for lung exercises, as they cannot be replicated at home. Others find yoga and *pranayama* useful to improve fatigue symptoms and ease their bodies back into daily routine.

"You have to reorganise your life, keeping in mind that you had Covid," says Dr Ingale. It is a piece of advice she has given to thousands of patients in the past year and a half. Patience, planned activity, a healthy diet, rest, regular medical check-ups and sustained effort towards your health are the only way to end Covid for good. Indeed, there are no short-cuts to treating Long Covid. ■

आज तक

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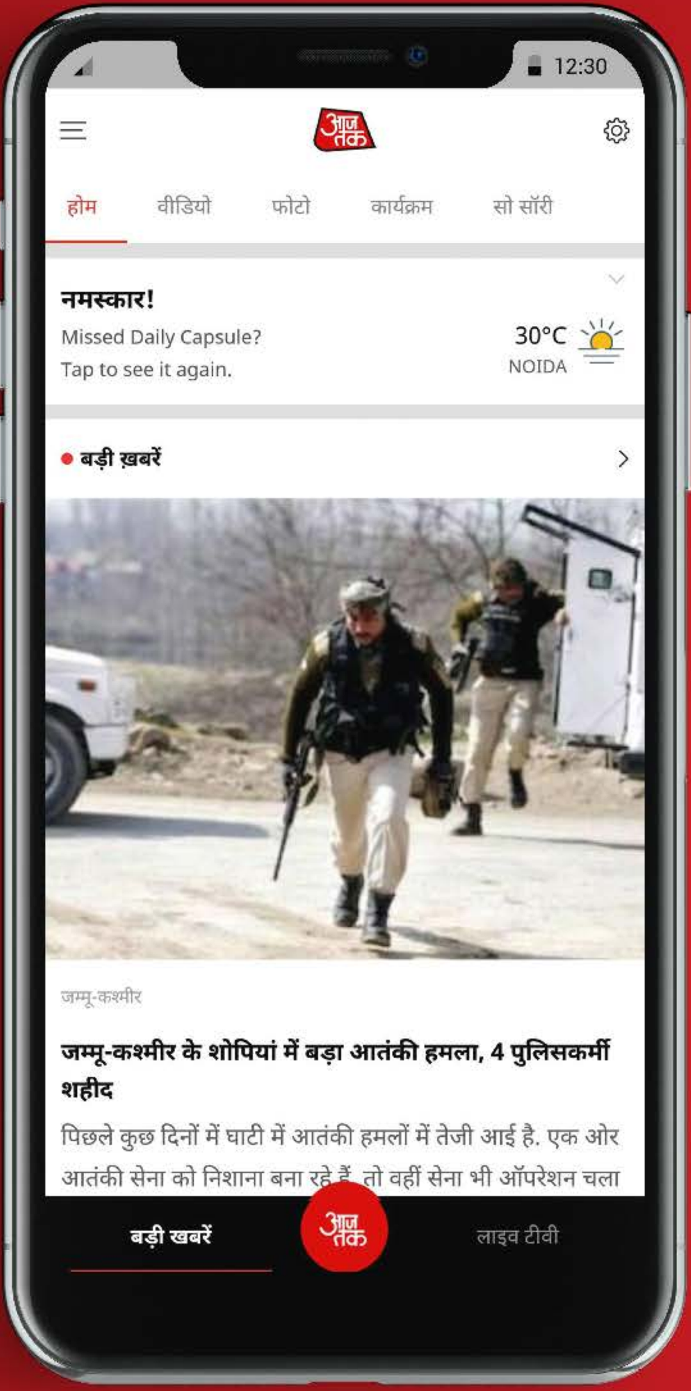

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नमस्कार!
Missed Daily Capsule?
Tap to see it again.
30°C
NOIDA

बड़ी ख़बरें

जम्मू-कश्मीर

जम्मू-कश्मीर के शोपियां में बड़ा आतंकी हमला, 4 पुलिसकर्मी शहीद

पिछले कुछ दिनों में घाटी में आतंकी हमलों में तेजी आई है. एक ओर आतंकी सेना को निशाना बना रहे हैं, तो वहीं सेना भी ऑपरेशन चला

बड़ी खबरें लाइव टीवी

SPECIAL REPORT **MEDICAL INSURANCE**

THE COVER WITH A HOLE

The rejection of their health insurance claims has landed many Covid patients and their families in dire financial straits

By Shubham Shankdhar

ANI

SALVATION, AT A PRICE
A Covid ward in Era's Lucknow Medical College and Hospital

Covid has been worse than just a health nightmare—it has also crippled many families in India financially. A handful of facts highlights this starkly. India has seen just under 30 million Covid cases and 377,000 deaths (those are official statistics, as of June 15) since the onset of the pandemic in India in March 2020. Covid treatment costs an arm and a leg: as a ballpark figure, Rs 1 lakh for a week in hospital. And India's per capita income is about Rs 1.4 lakh *a year*.

At about 2 per cent of GDP, India's public health spend is among the lowest in the world. For comparison, countries like the US, UK, France, Germany and Japan spend near 9 per cent of GDP. The 2017-18 National Health accounts estimated Indians' out-of-pocket medical expenses at nearly 60 per cent, while a 2018 Public Health Foundation study projected that medical bills pushed 55 million into poverty in 2017. And the pandemic has certainly done far worse.

People pay risk premiums on their health insurance in the hope—no, the expectation—that it will buy them protection should they end up in hospital. In reality, it's often a chimera, with claim eligibility and payouts subject to the vagaries of 'deductibles', 'sub-limits', 'exclusions', 'co-pay' percentages and such other devils in the fine print of insurance policies. That Covid is a new disease—with little in the way of 'standard treatment protocols'—means arbitrary standards leading to dubious rejection of insurance claims.

Rajesh Yadav, a 50-year-old construction contractor in Lucknow's Alambagh, was diagnosed with Covid last month. His condition deteriorated and Rajesh had to be hospitalised. He was insured under a *cashless* policy of Rs 10 lakh, but, even so, had to deposit Rs 35,000 up front when he was admitted to a hospital in Lucknow that was in his insurer's network. A week later, when he was deemed well enough to return home, he was presented with a bill of Rs 3 lakh for treatment. However, on submission of his claim to the insurer, Yadav was informed that it had been rejected because his 'hospitalisation had been unnecessary'.

In March last year, the IRDA (Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority) issued a circular to Indian insurance companies instructing them that they would have to include Covid in the list of covered treatments in standard medical insurance policies, and that this provision would apply to all existing medical policies as well. However, there are ambiguities even in the IRDA circular: "Where hospitalisation is covered in a policy, insurers shall ensure that cases related to Covid shall be expeditiously handled. The costs of '*admissible* medical expenses' (emphasis added) shall be settled in accordance to the applicable terms and conditions." 'Admissible expenses' are freely interpretable till contested—and that process is itself a punishment. The ground reality for Covid patients who need hospitalisation is that admission fees must be paid before treatment begins, regardless of their insurance status.

According to General Insurance Council data, as of May 5, 2021, 47,898 Covid claims had been rejected or withdrawn, while 187,754 claims worth Rs 6,848 crore were under review. The high rejection rate of claims is a problem that has persisted despite the Centre's calls for the insurance industry to find a solution. On April 22, the Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman asked IRDA chairman S.C. Khuntia to quickly resolve reported issues with cashless claims, since many like Yadav had had to make large deposits despite having cashless policies and even at network hospitals. A day later, the IRDA issued a circular on the issue. Redirecting the problem to insurers, the IRDA said, 'Insurance companies are advised to ensure expeditious settlement of cashless claims under health insurance policies, on a cashless basis.' That advice seems to have been honoured largely in the breach.

YOUR CLAIM HAS BEEN REJECTED

A problem with official handwaving—the IRDA's addition of Covid to existing medical policies in March 2020 or the finance minister's prod to honour cashless policies—is that while it passes the buck, it does not solve the problem on the ground.

In order to claim medical insurance, policyholders are normally required to inform their insurers within 24 to 48 hours of being hospitalised. By law, insurance firms must directly settle hospital accounts, under cashless policies. However, consumers have the option—to avoid delays in their release after treatment—to settle hospital bills on their own and submit these bills later to make insurance claims. Hospitals have tried to justify upfront advance payments even on cashless policies as a buffer against claims rejected by insurers. "When payments are cleared by insurance companies, we refund the advances to patients," says a senior administrative officer of a chain of hospitals in Delhi-NCR. Another problem is that many medical supplies needed for Covid treatment—PPE kits, sanitisers, masks and gloves—are deductibles under most insurance policies, adding to the out-of-pocket cost for patients that many are unprepared for.

"Deductions happen mostly due to policy restrictions," says Sanjay Datta, head of claims, underwriting and reinsurance at ICICI Lombard General Insurance. "Consumables such as PPE kits, sanitisers, masks and gloves are not covered in health insurance. There could also be room rent limits [in the policy terms] or co-payment clauses." M.N. Sarma, secretary general of the General Insurance Council, also highlights that insurance firms are

CENTRAL HEALTH INSURANCE STATUS

Ayushman Bharat update (as of end-November 2019)

- **32 states** and UTs are implementing the scheme
- Hospital admissions: **14 million**
- Funding authorised for admissions: **Rs 17,535 crore**
- Hospitals empanelled: **24,653** (public-private split: 54%-46%)

THE PUBLIC HEALTH CHALLENGE

- India's public health spending is about two per cent of GDP
- About 60 per cent of the population does not have medical insurance
- India has among the highest rates of out-of-pocket health spending in the world
- The country is highly dependent on private healthcare

THE COST OF A BED

(Pre-government mandated price caps)

- Isolation bed: **Rs 24,000 to 25,000** per day
- ICU bed (without ventilator): **Rs 34,000 to 43,000** per day
- ICU bed (with ventilator): **Rs 44,000 to 54,000** per day

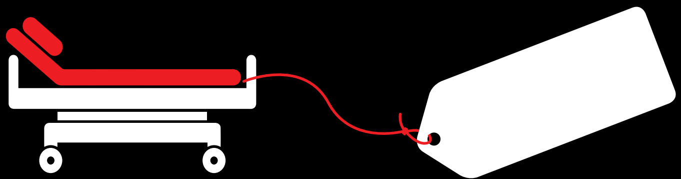
(Does not include medicines or consumables like PPE kits)

THE COST OF A BED

(Post-government mandated price caps)

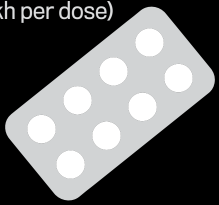
- Isolation bed: **Rs 8,000 to 10,000** per day
- ICU (without ventilator): **Rs 13,000 to 15,000** per day
- ICU (with ventilator): **Rs 15,000 to 18,000** per day

(Does not include medicines or consumables like PPE kits)



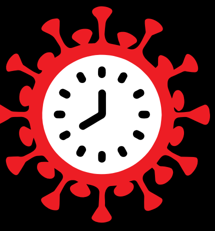
A HANDFUL OF PILLS

- Medication: Includes drugs like Ivermectin, Dolo, Doxy, etc. The cost could be as much as **Rs 5,000 to 10,000** for one course of treatment
- Meropenem (antibiotic): **Rs 5,000** per day
- Remdesivir: Rs 800-2,700 (was being sold in the black market for **Rs 30,000 a vial**)
- Tocilizumab: Rs 45,000 per dose (the black market price is over Rs 1 lakh per dose)



PROBABLE TIME IN HOSPITAL

- Mild cases do not require hospitalisation
- Moderately severe cases could need a week to 10 days in hospital
- Those suffering severe cases can expect to spend a month or more in hospital



legally bound only to cover 'reasonable' costs. Alleging cases of inflated hospital bills, he says, "All health insurance, or any insurance for that matter, [only] covers expenses 'actually and reasonably incurred'. If someone is made to pay Rs 20 [for treatment] where they should have paid only Rs 10, that cannot be deemed a 'reasonably incurred' cost." To prevent exploitation by insurers under this justification for claim denial, he moots the creation of a Medical Services Regulatory Authority.

Insurers say that more than 1.1 million Covid claims have been processed so far, and another 187,000 are currently under consideration. Some of this number reflects active cases—as Bhaskar Nerurkar, head of health claims at Bajaj Allianz General Insurance, explains. "As long as a patient remains under treatment, the claim remains open," he says. He also raises an old point of contention with insurers, that incomplete paperwork is the cause of many claims being delayed. "The pressure on hospitals is very high because of Covid," he says, highlighting how difficult it can be for patients to get together the necessary paperwork for a valid claim.

STATE OF PLAY

In 2018, health insurance accounted for about a quarter of the total insurance market. However, according to the National Family Health Survey, most Indian states and Union territories report under-50 per cent health insurance coverage. Only a few states stand as exceptions, including Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Assam and Kerala.

The Ayushman Bharat Yojana, launched in 2018, aims to provide an annual health cover of Rs 5 lakh per family to about 40 per cent of the population. The scheme includes and subsumes several central and state medical insurance programmes launched over the past 20 years.

In a November 2020 review of Ayushman Bharat, health minister Harsh Vardhan claimed "14 million cashless treatments worth over Rs 17,500 crore" under the scheme, but independent reviews have been less optimistic. They also point to exclusionary eligibility criteria, which has left many in the target demographic high and dry. Others point out that it does not include outpatient services and that it is heavily dependent on private hospitals. What is revealing is the revised Ayushman Bharat spending for 2019-20—against a budgeted Rs 6,400 crore, only Rs 3,314 crore was spent that year. For financial year 2022, the budget has once again been set at Rs 6,400 crore.

IN END-APRIL, THE DELHI HIGH COURT PULLED UP MEDICAL INSURERS, ORDERING THEM TO SPEED UP COVID CLAIM PROCESSING TIME FROM SIX OR SEVEN HOURS TO AN HOUR OR LESS

On April 28, having heard several petitions on medical infrastructure—including those relating to shortages of oxygen, medicines, beds and ventilators—the Delhi High Court ordered insurance companies to speedily process Covid claims, observing that six or seven hours to review a claim was too long a turnaround time. Ordering that the response time had to be an hour or less, it warned that insurers violating its ruling would risk contempt of court. While this may speed up the processing of claims, it won't reduce the rejection rate.

'Pre-existing (medical) conditions' are another commonly cited technicality for rejection of claims by Covid patients. To make matters worse, many policyholders are found to have not disclosed these conditions when buying their policies. Insurers take a hard stand on this, saying the onus is on customers to fully declare their medical history when buying insurance. "How to deal with non-declaration or misdeclaration of pre-existing diseases is subjective. Insurance is all about trust. Customers should refrain from hiding material information while buying a policy," says Datta of ICICI Lombard.

Others say insurers, faced with a sharp spike in the number of claims, are invoking arbitrary rules. Dr Farahim Khan, a resident doctor at the Holy Family Hospital in Delhi, says insurance requests were settled with far greater ease during the first wave of Covid-19. About the extra scrutiny during the second wave, he says that if patients are hospitalised following positive RT-PCR tests, insurance companies will now ask to see their SpO2 (oxygen saturation) levels at the time of admission to validate claims. If the level was above 94/95, claims are being rejected, with insurers saying these patients did not require hospitalisation. Also, if medical reports mention co-morbidities or disqualifying pre-existing conditions, there is greater scrutiny.

Clearly, the official interventions so far, by the IRDA, the finance ministry and even the courts, have not been able to substantially address the problem. And while the rejection of claims may devastate families, even insurers need time to price in risks and update their deals with customers. There also needs to be an accessible and fair regulatory authority to oversee disputes. Until then, insurers will continue to complain, and consumers will continue to suffer. ■

– with inputs from Aprajita Sharma

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

Reimag with com

ining a circular future people, planet and munities at its core.

With a net Water Positive footprint across the country, Pernod Ricard India is building a sustainable responsible organization focussing on each aspect of its products and human well-being, from *Grain to Glass.*

> 2020 marked the end of another phenomenal decade in our growth story that began more than 25 years ago. With COVID-19 outbreak, it has also tested our resilience, agility and reinforced the need to embrace sustainability in everything we do.
>
> The pandemic has proved that businesses need to reimagine themselves and must rethink their vision and strategies for the future. Apart from the need for strong environmental, social, and governance (ESG) improvement systems, there's an urgent need for collaboration among businesses, governments, and civil society. The Indian subcontinent is touted to play the defining role in the next decade, and we believe that we have an important role to play.
>
> **- Thibault Cuny**
> **MD & CEO, *PERNOD RICARD INDIA***

It's a unique 4-P strategy. The traditional concept places profits and sales at the centre of an organization. At Pernod Ricard India (PRI), a leading wine and spirits manufacturer, it is the People who are at the heart of its purpose. The four P's of its plan include Product (Circularity), People (Employees), Population Communities), and the Planet (Climate Change).

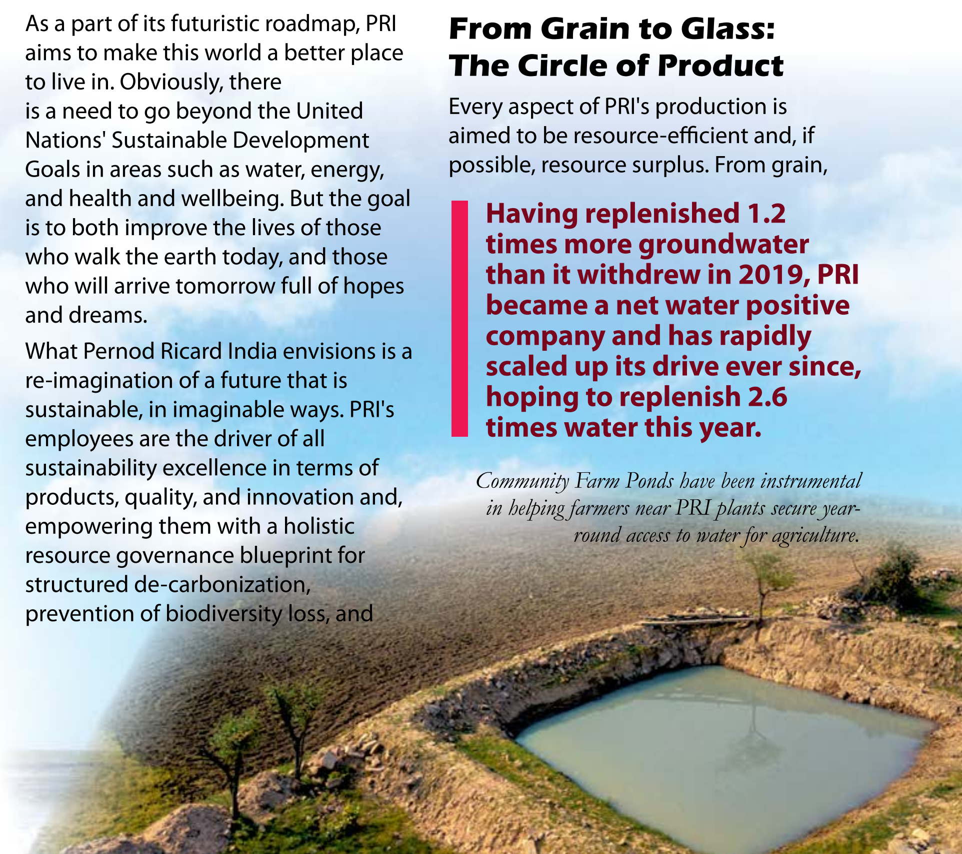
As a part of its futuristic roadmap, PRI aims to make this world a better place to live in. Obviously, there is a need to go beyond the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals in areas such as water, energy, and health and wellbeing. But the goal is to both improve the lives of those who walk the earth today, and those who will arrive tomorrow full of hopes and dreams.

What Pernod Ricard India envisions is a re-imagination of a future that is sustainable, in imaginable ways. PRI's employees are the driver of all sustainability excellence in terms of products, quality, and innovation and, empowering them with a holistic resource governance blueprint for structured de-carbonization, prevention of biodiversity loss, and preservation of resources with a shared value is paramount to ensuring that these efforts reap benefits for people, communities and ultimately the business itself too. Committing to transparency and accountability of its business operations, along with fostering stakeholder dialogues, PRI also published its first Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) Report in 2020.

From Grain to Glass: The Circle of Product

Every aspect of PRI's production is aimed to be resource-efficient and, if possible, resource surplus. From grain,

> **Having replenished 1.2 times more groundwater than it withdrew in 2019, PRI became a net water positive company and has rapidly scaled up its drive ever since, hoping to replenish 2.6 times water this year.**



Community Farm Ponds have been instrumental in helping farmers near PRI plants secure year-round access to water for agriculture.

the raw material for the spirits, to glass, used to distribute products, there is a continual effort to use less, and return more. **With the vision to embed Circularity at the centre of every product's lifecycle, the company has set clear-cut 2030 targets to accelerate the 4Rs of Reduce (consumption), Reuse (materials), Recycle (packaging), and Recharge (resources).**

Consider the case of water, a primary ingredient and hence the largest resource that a wine-and-spirits maker uses. Having mapped out the water stress levels; availability versus withdrawals at its key manufacturing and bottling locations, PRI has deployed a double-pronged strategy to minimize within fence consumption and create water abundance at the deep aquifer level with integrated water development programs with local communities. Robust manufacturing and bottling practices combined with rainwater harvesting and effluent system have helped the company **reduce its water consumption by 54% since 2015.**

Pernod Ricard India Foundation's WAL (Water, Agriculture, Livelihoods) program works with more than **108,000 community members near 12 plants** to foster water resilience with groundwater recharge and increased surface availability while promoting sustainable & regenerative agriculture with close to 19,000 farmers.

A Net Zero Carbon Goal

PRI realizes that in order to secure an equitable and just future for the upcoming generations, a circular mindset must be complemented with burning efforts to reduce its carbon footprint by not only focussing on direct, indirect emissions from its operations, but also ingraining climate-sensitive systems and culture to curb emissions emanating from activities beyond its fence, as well. Cognizant of this pertinent need, **The company has recently upgraded its GHG emissions reduction target for scope 1 & 2 activities from 30% and now aims to achieve net-zero emission for these activities by 2030.**

> "Climate Change is fast becoming the most pertinent threat to our world with the potential to disrupt everything that we've known and built. Building a 'zero-carbon' business is central to our vision of the future, and we are committed to emerge and lead the line as one of the most resource-efficient companies in the Indian wines & spirits landscape by focussing on green resources, greener governance and the greenest culture of conviviality"
>
> **- Rajesh Mishra,**
> **Chief Operating Officer,**
> ***Pernod Ricard India***

> **PRI aims to source 100% of its electricity from renewable sources by 2025**

Electricity generation from coal and other fossil fuels is one of the largest sources of carbon emissions. The Pernod Ricard group has committed to using electricity generated only from renewable sources and is a signatory of the RE100 consortium, a global initiative by the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) bringing together the world's most influential businesses committed to 100% renewable electricity. **PRI's bottling unit in Nashik runs on 100% solar energy.** Such trends will become the norm, rather than the exception, over the next few years.

Ananda: Taking Care of Each Other with Holistic Wellness

No organization can build a sustainable future without its people. Pernod Ricard India's raison d'etre (reason of existence) is people, and people are the creators of conviviality, not merely acting as resources for the company, but being its owners, innovators, ambassadors.

Ananda which literally translates into *'bliss',* began as an idea that was based on studies, which conclude that there is a high correlation between people's happiness and effectiveness. If the employees are cheerful and comfortable, their passion and commitment will be higher. To motivate employees to create customer delight, there is a need to boost their multi-faceted personality. The focus has been to develop their talents that lay beyond work competencies.

With a concerted push on Health & Safety, PRI has also ensured zero fatalities in its operations in the last three years.

However, as it evolved into a radical strategy, Ananda developed into a full-fledged program engaged with eight levels of employees' wellness and motivation. These included occupational, social, environmental, intellectual, spiritual, physical, financial, and emotional issues. They enabled PRI to construct a new approach that 'challenged the classical employee engagement model'.

Ananda, therefore, helped the employees to come together, and develop, showcase, and share their admirable non-work talents with colleagues. Its success was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Regular workshops were held on art, mindfulness, online team games, and fitness. Systematic online psychological counselling was also conducted on an ongoing basis. Employees virtually connected with their colleagues to inspire teamwork and team spirit.

> "In 2020, the overall employees' morale was stretched at PRI, as was the case with other companies in India and across the globe. Ananda provided a ready platform to keep its employees engaged and motivated during this crisis. Every employee, including family members, was touched more than 17 times under the programs."
>
> **- Shrikant Lonikar**
> **Chief Human Resources Officer,**
> ***Pernod Ricard India***

Transforming Communities, Accelerating Local Development

Pernod Ricard India envisions '*Leaving No One Behind*' by institutionalizing a shared growth roadmap for its local communities and protecting the natural environment of geographies it is based out of.

With the right blend of local needs, national priorities and global goals (SDGs) integrated into its social impact strategy and programs, PRI is stewarding community development near 24 operations units by positively impacting almost ~900,000 lives annually.

> "We measure our growth, not only through the economic value we generate but also through the value and gains that we create for our society. By Creating Shared Value, we truly believe that we have the ability to transform communities near our plants and area of special needs and become a partner of choice for them."
>
> **- Sunil Duggal**
> **VP – Corporate Affairs, Sustainability & Responsibility,**
> ***Pernod Ricard India***

Use of homemade organic manure has not only increased the crop yield sizeably for women farmers in Shivpuri but also eliminated chemical fertilizer inputs and costs altogether.

The PRI Foundation is shaping **climate & drought resilient farming communities** by engaging **18,971 farmers** directly on sustainable agriculture, including **5633 small-holders and 4,317 women farmers,** helping them with viable growth and augment their disposable incomes. PRI's WAL program has also helped transform close to **5000 acres of land with regenerative agriculture, agroforestry and bio-diversity plots** supplemented by the creation of 680 natural water structures for better soil health and water retention. In addition to replenishing 2.6x groundwater in its community watersheds and ensuring year-round availability of water for communities, the foundation is also committed to improving access to safely managed water for deprived groups. 30 Water ATMs deployed in 8 states have been providing year-round drinking water to over 150,000 beneficiaries.

Empowering Rural Women is a key agenda cutting across all sectors and programs, as part of its diversity and inclusion outlook at PRI. The company believes that investing in women is not just a social justice issue, but it is also a powerful opportunity to catalyze inclusive development in Rural India. Across key programs last year, **PRIF worked with more than 140,238 rural women, girl children and women social entrepreneurs** to facilitate access to quality primary healthcare focussed on menstrual healthcare and sanitation, better educational opportunities for girl children, increased ownership in agri-livelihood activities and impact social incubation and support.

Responsible Conviviality: Fighting Alcohol Misuse in Society

As a responsible corporate citizen, PRI is cognizant of the fact that while alcohol creates memorable convivial moments, its misuse may have many detrimental effects on the society. With a structured approach for de-risking community groups vulnerable to Alcohol and Substance Misuse, PRI has deployed long-term prevention and restorative programs to inculcate positive drinking attitudes and responsible behaviour for road safety with at-risk cohorts such as truck drivers who often fall victim to alcohol abuse due to long hours on the road, poor health and stressful working conditions. Since November 2020, PRI Foundation in partnership with Ambuja Cement Foundation, has directly impacted more than 2,400 truckers with 625 Outpatient Department consultations, 1032 Counselling & one-to-one sessions for better lifestyle and safe consumption practices and 601 weekly road safety sessions and activities. PRIF has also recently launched the 'Child Rights Fellowship' program in partnership with Ashoka University and the Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR). With a holistic lens on safeguarding children overall development and growth in five districts of the capital city, the program deploys the expertise of talented associates from institutes of repute to work with DCPCR on the prevention of substance abuse and rehabilitation of children who have fallen prey to substance abuse with specialized care.

SEHGAL
FOUNDATION
Pernod Ricard India
FOUNDATION
समृद्धि परियोजना

Community institutions under PRI programs like gram Sangathans, self-help groups, producer groups have provided the right platforms for women to make their voices heard.

PRI's unique bottle recycling initiative has contributed to a reduction of 28,000 tons of CO_2 emissions for the company.

PRI's Behror Unit has been recently platinum certified as a 'Zero Waste to Landfill' operation site by TUV Nord.

Zero Waste: Leaving Only Memories Behind

PRI's vision to champion circularity draws a full circle with its efforts to eliminate waste at every step of its operations and beyond by preventing its products, packaging, and marketing materials from reaching landfills.

As of 2020, 98% of primary product packaging including glass and paper is recyclable. The company is also heavily investing in scaling the recycling practices with a few of its best-selling brands including The Royal Stag and Imperial Blue, encompassing systems to "collect, sort and wash" used and original bottles. This allows the company to reuse them several times. In 2019-20, this practice was instrumental in saving 26,000 tons of glass, or 10% of the total bottles.

With its 2030 S&R roadmap, Pernod Ricard India has committed to build on the momentum of its ongoing efforts to lead resource-efficient production, tangible community development, environmental preservation and responsible consumption to ambitiously drive its business, with a renewed sense of purpose and inclusive partnerships that bring shared value to all.

> As we enter the next decade, I am confident that with people and communities at the heart of our business and with the unwavering collective strength of our employees, customers, and partners, we will continue to innovate and transform to usher sustainable shared growth for our communities across the country and bring the best moments of responsible conviviality for our consumers."

Thibault Cuny ,
MD & CEO, *PERNOD RICARD INDIA*
adds while reflecting on
PRI's roadmap for the next decade.

A MATTER OF PROPRIETY

Adhering to norms and protocols is the only way civil servants can protect themselves from political pressures

BY KAUSHIK DEKA

The recent unsavoury public spat between the Union government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the West Bengal government of chief minister Mamata Banerjee over an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer is not the first such episode in the history of Centre-state relations. There have been numerous such face-offs between the central and state governments over the posting, reward or punishment of a civil servant. Often, these are fuelled by political motives.

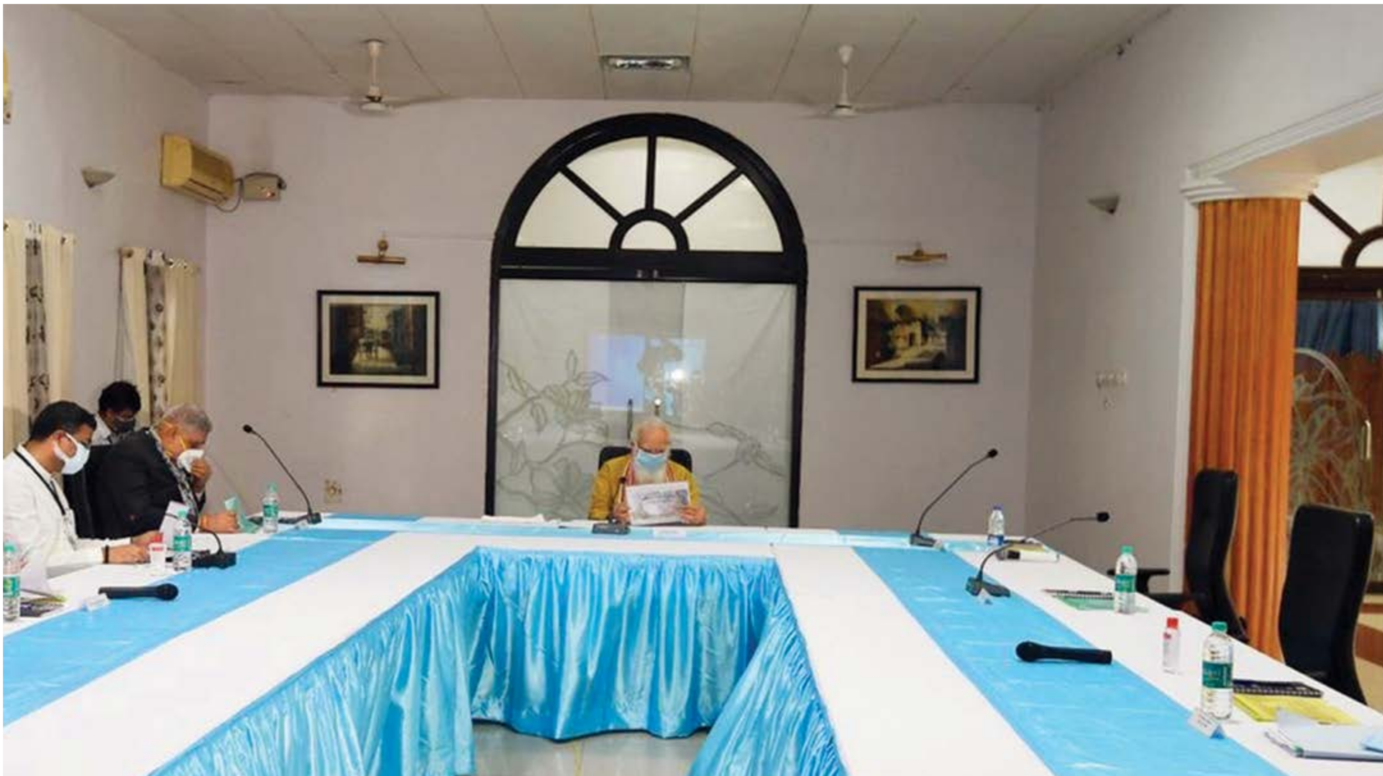
However, if public administration experts are to be believed, the latest conflict over Alapan Bandyopadhyay, the now retired chief secretary of West Bengal—triggered by an incident on May 28 when the prime minister visited the state—has highlighted a worrisome trend in the country's governance structure. While the founders of the Constitution envisaged the bureaucracy as an apolitical institution, civil servants are increasingly getting embroiled in political conflicts involving the leaders of different parties and governments and, often, even within the same party and government.

They are forced into these conflicts because of their vulnerability to the political executive. At times, they are also driven to please their political masters by a desperation for career advancement. The result is the increasing politicisation of civil servants, dividing the service vertically along lines of ideology or political allegiance. "Politicians often use this fragility of civil servants to seek better or cushier postings to break their resilience," says Ajay Dua, a former secretary in the Union ministry for industry and commerce. "The younger bureaucrat will observe who gets the reward—those adhering to the rulebook or those showing allegiance to their political masters."

As a result, the unity that once

MISSING IN ACTION
The PM at a Cyclone Yaas meeting where the West Bengal CM and chief secretary's seats are seen vacant

ANI Photo



ANI Photo

FIRST DIBS West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee with chief secretary Alapan Bandyopadhyay

served as a bulwark against blatant political abuse now stands eroded. This breakdown fuels further politicisation, creating a vicious cycle. "One unfortunate development has been that senior officers don't support junior officers," says the former Union home secretary G.K. Pillai. "This increases the vulnerability of an officer, who then starts believing that kow-towing to political diktat is the only mechanism for professional protection."

WHO IS TO BLAME?

A large section of the bureaucrats believes that they themselves are responsible for their predicament and point to Bandyopadhyay's case as an example. Several IAS officers assert that the fiasco could have been averted by bureaucrats on both sides. Of course, Bandyopadhyay had little choice but to follow the chief minister to whom he reports daily, but many civil servants concur that the former West Bengal chief secretary erred in his duties towards the prime minister. "The prime minister's programme does not come up suddenly," says Kumar Sanjay Krishna, who retired as Assam's chief secretary last year. "The state machinery is informed well in advance. Were I in Bandyopadhyay's place, I'd have convinced the chief minister about the chief secretary's protocol obligation to be part of the prime minister's programme. Even if the chief secretary cannot be present due to some unavoidable circumstance, he or she must depute another officer. None of this happened in this case, which reflects badly on the IAS officer."

Another central government officer cites the example of Odisha. A few hours before his arrival in West Bengal, the PM landed in Bhubaneswar to review the impact of Cyclone Yaas in the state. Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik and his chief secretary were there at the airport to receive the prime minister.

While Bandyopadhyay may have erred at his end, the officer issuing the order asking him to report in Delhi also ignored the rulebook. According to many former bureaucrats, he should have flagged a procedural flaw in the directive, exposing it to suggestions of political intent. Bandyopadhyay had never been empaneled to serve under the central government at the joint secretary level. A non-empaneled officer can only take up positions such as director or under-secretary, far lower in rank than what Bandyopadhyay's post was. "This was such a stupid decision," says former Union home secretary Pillai. "There has never been a precedent. Someone should have put their foot down and pointed out the illegality of the order. Civil servants should always write their notes in the file. That's their right. This practice is not followed these days and bureaucrats blindly follow orders."

Shailaja Chandra, a former secretary to the Union government and a former chief secretary of Delhi, acknowledges this growing unwillingness to place facts on paper and that there is always the possibility of facing humiliation and 'punishment' if you do not conform to the political will. But, like many of her colleagues, the former IAS officer asserts that adhering to norms is the only protection against political vendetta. "The shortcomings of any move must be highlighted in writing—howsoever unpalatable the advice might be," she says. "At least, the officer will not be labelled as biased or lacking in courage and professional integrity."

WHO IS THE REAL MASTER?

The game of oneupmanship between Modi and Mamata has resuscitated the perennial demand for insulating civil servants from the whims and fancies of their political masters. In 2013, in response to a PIL filed by several former civil servants, the Supreme Court stated that officers should have a minimum fixed tenure, they should

"One unfortunate development has been that senior officers don't support junior officers. This increases the vulnerability of an officer who then starts believing that kow-towing to the political diktat is the only mechanism for professional protection"

G.K. PILLAI
Former Union Home Secretary

"There is a tendency among some new officers not to follow propriety or protocol. This has serious ramifications"

KUMAR SANJAY KRISHNA
Former Chief Secretary, Assam

not act on verbal orders from politicians, and civil service boards (CSBs) should be set up at the central and state levels within three months to regulate postings, transfers and disciplinary action. It also asked the government to pass a comprehensive law on the subject.

On January 28, 2014, the UPA government notified the Indian Administrative Service (Cadre) Amendment Rules, making it clear that an officer in a cadre post will hold the office for at least two years unless he or she has in the meantime been promoted, retired or sent on deputation outside the state or training exceeding two months. The state governments were mandated to constitute a CSB, headed by a top executive such as a chief secretary. A cadre officer can be transferred before the minimum specified period only on the CSB's recommendation, which must record the reasons in writing. While 20 states have constituted the CSB, most remain non-functional. And IAS officers remain convenient pawns for political manoeuvring.

In March, for instance, the Central Administrative Tribunal (CAT) reinstated the CSB in Karnataka, which the state government had kept in abeyance. The action came in response to an application filed by the IAS officer B. Sharat, challenging his premature transfer as deputy commissioner of Mysuru district. The CAT also asked the chief minister to revisit Sharat's transfer order.

Former IAS officers say that the friction between the political executive and bureaucracy is also a function of the maturity of leaders at the state or central helm. According to them, unlike in the past, when seasoned politicians often used efficient and well-performing officers to their advantage, the current climate is of distrust between the political class and the bureaucracy. "There was a chief minister in Maharashtra who did not mind bending some rules here and there but told his officers not to sign anything they were not comfortable with," says a Maharashtra cadre IAS officer. Another officer cites the example of Telangana chief minister K. Chandrashekar Rao, who appointed a chief secretary ignoring several other officers

WHO CONTROLS AN IAS OFFICER?

Selection and appointment

➲ Union Public Service Commission, a constitutionally mandated body, selects IAS officers through a rigorous examination process

➲ Once the examination process is over, the UPSC sends names of selected candidates to the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT). The President appoints these officers after which they are allocated state cadres

➲ State Civil Services Board (CSB), which include the chief secretary, seniormost additional chief secretary and secretary of personnel, is legally responsible for postings and transfer of its cadre officers. Twenty states have constituted CSBs, but most remain non-functional. The chief minister always has the final say on postings and transfer of civil servants

Promotion

➲ IAS promotions are regulated by guidelines framed by DoPT

➲ The state CSB, wherever it is functional, recommends promotions for state cadre officers. The central CSB, which consists of the cabinet secretary, principal secretary to the prime minister, the home secretary, and the secretary, DoPT, along with the Appointments Committee of Cabinet (ACC), recommend promotions of IAS officers under the Union government

Deputation to the Centre

➲ After serving for seven years in the state, an officer can apply for deputation at the Centre, at the rank of deputy secretary. The state government must give consent

➲ After completion of 12 years of service, the officer can join the Centre at the rank of a director. The state government's nod is compulsory

➲ The Union government selects cadre officers—who have completed 16 years of service—and empanels them for the posts of joint secretary, additional secretary and secretary

➲ Empanelment is based on the recommendations of the central CSB and ACC. The selection process involves a 360-degree appraisal procedure including a multi-source feedback (MSF) from various stakeholders

➲ Officers from the batch of 2007 will not be eligible for empanelment if they have not served under Union government on deputation

➲ Empanelment does not confer a right to appointment under the central government

➲ The Centre can take service of an empaneled officer provided he is willing, and the state government agrees to release him. In case of a dispute over an officer willing to join the Centre, the Union government's decision remains the final

➲ Deputation at the Centre can last seven years after which an officer returns to the state cadre for three years, called the cooling off period

Who can punish an IAS officer?

On disciplinary proceedings like dismissal, it is the Centre that has the final say. State governments have the power to suspend an IAS officer, but they must send a report to the DoPT and inform every 90 days about the status of suspension

Grievance redress system

For settling any dispute on appointment, transfer, promotion and posting, an IAS officer can approach the Central Administrative Tribunal (CAT).

> **"Politicians often make use of the fragility of civil servants in seeking better or cushier postings to break their resilience. The younger bureaucrat will observe who gets the reward—those adhering to the rulebook or those showing allegiance to their political masters"**
>
> **AJAY DUA**
> Former Secretary, Union ministry for industry and commerce

> **“The civil servants, particularly those from IAS, are well-trained and experienced to handle political interference and tension”**
>
> **OM PRAKASH RAWAT**
> *Former Chief Election Commissioner*

> **“Shortcomings of any move must be highlighted in writing—howsoever unpalatable the advice may be. At least, the officer will not be labelled as biased or lacking in courage and professional integrity”**
>
> **SHAILAJA CHANDRA**
> **Former Secretary to the Union government and former Chief Secretary of Delhi**

senior to him. “The chief minister met each of them to assuage their anger,” says the bureaucrat.

A section among IAS officers claims that the power of the state government to take punitive action against civil servants, coupled with the immature handling of IAS officers by some chief ministers, is also responsible for creating Centre-state friction. According to the All India Services (AIS) Rules, the Centre cannot take any disciplinary action against IAS, IPS or IFS officers posted in their state cadres. It is the government that the IAS officer is serving under who is the competent authority to suspend him or her.

Some chief ministers use this power to demand unquestioning loyalty from bureaucrats even if it involves breaking norms or protocol. “It’s happening more in states headed by temperamental politicians such as Arvind Kejriwal or Mamata Banerjee,” says an IAS officer from the AGMUT (Arunachal Pradesh-Goa-Mizoram and Union Territory) cadre. In 2015, Shakuntala Gamlin’s appointment as the acting chief secretary of Delhi was held hostage to the power struggle between the then lieutenant governor Najeeb Jung and chief minister Kejriwal. In 2018, chief secretary Anshu Prakash alleged that he had been assaulted by two MLAs in the presence of Kejriwal at his home. Mamata doesn’t allow any IAS officer to go on deputation at the Centre.

Besides transfer and postings, the increasing Centre-state political friction is also impacting empanelment and deputation. According to Section 6(1) of the IAS (Cadre) Rules, 1954, a cadre officer, with the concurrence of the concerned state government and the central government, can be deputed for service under the central government or another state government, subject to the officer’s consent. The Union government must consult with the state government, which must release the officer. In case of disagreement, the central government’s decision remains final.

However, though the final authority vests with the Centre, the rules are vague if the state government decides not to relieve the officer. Of course, if an officer is willing to join the Centre but the state doesn’t relieve him, he or she can move CAT and the courts. However, the rules are silent on what happens if the officer is unwilling and the state too is not releasing him—as in Bandyopadhyay’s case. Last December, the Union home ministry had summoned three West Bengal officers, who were in charge of BJP national president J.P. Nadda’s security, for central deputation after his convoy was attacked in the state. Mamata did not release the officers.

The new selection process for empanelment has also been criticised on the grounds that it is designed to induct officers loyal to the political ideology of the central government. In April 2015, the Modi government introduced the 360-degree appraisal procedure involving a multi-source feedback (MSF) from various stakeholders, including seniors, peers and juniors. The process also considers the overall service record, vigilance status, integrity, behavioural competencies, functional skills, domain expertise, delivery and the potential and suitability of the officers concerned. On the surface, the 360-degree appraisal appears to be more democratic as it broadens the performance review process, but critics claim the process is designed to rope in “ideologically inclined” officials, not independent-thinking ones.

An August 2017 report by the parliamentary standing committee on personnel, public grievance, law and justice, headed by Congress MP Anand Sharma, also called the process opaque, subjective and susceptible to manipulation. “As the feedback could come from anywhere, the officials started showing political and ideological affiliations in their official actions to get noticed. This muddied the waters further,” says a former IAS officer from the Rajasthan cadre. However, last year, the Delhi High Court upheld the 360-degree review process as it found “nothing amiss” in the MSF process.

While such debates over process and politics will continue, there is no dispute that the way out of the political whirlpool is in the practice of propriety. With the change in political environment, there could be more conflicts between the Centre and the states, but these are unlikely to have a far-reaching impact on the functioning of the bureaucracy. “The civil servants, particularly those from the IAS, are well-trained and experienced to handle political interference and tension,” says the former chief election commissioner Om Prakash Rawat. And the key to a deft handling of these tricky situations is bringing propriety to official conduct. Sacrifice it, and the action may see political repercussion, for which the official will have only himself or herself to blame. ■

with Romita Datta & Rahul Noronha

THE GUN BATTLE INSIDE SOUTH BLOCK

THE INDIAN ARMY'S URGENT DEMAND FOR GUNS HAS INCREASED THE PRESSURE ON THE GOVERNMENT'S AATMANIRBHAR BHARAT POLICY

BY SANDEEP UNNITHAN

Over the past few months, the ministry of defence (MoD) and the Indian Army have been at loggerheads over the acquisition of 400 towed artillery guns for Rs 4,000 crore. The army's proposal for acquiring 400 howitzers from Israel had reached the stage of approval by the director general (acquisitions) in September 2019, but was shelved after indigenous artillery programmes began showing promise. Earlier this year, as a nine-month standoff with China eased off in eastern Ladakh, the army revived the gun import proposal, citing an "urgent operational necessity" on the northern borders to justify the import of 20 regiments (each regiment has 20 guns). Adding to the army's urgency is the fact that deliveries of the 'Dhanush', an indigenously-built version of the Swedish FH-77B Bofors gun, have slowed down. Once the DG (acquisitions) clears the proposal, it can be sent to the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) for the final approval.

Defence ministry officials, however, want the army's towed gun import to be scrapped, arguing that any off-the-shelf import of guns at this stage will seriously impact indigenous artillery development. The MoD's Department of Defence Production (DoDP) is backing the Advanced Towed Artillery Gun System (ATAGS), designed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and produced indigenously by their industry partners in the private sector, Bharat Forge and Tata Advanced Systems Ltd. The DoDP considers the howitzer programme to be a test for the government's Aatmanirbhar Bharat programme to achieve self-sufficiency in defence and is arguing for a larger number of ATAGS to be procured from the Indian industry, including from the Ordnance Factory Board (OFB).

The deadlock continues even as a December 31, 2021, deadline to stop imports of howitzers looms on the horizon. Howitzers of the 155/ 52 calibre are among the 101 items on the 'negative list' released by the MoD in August 2020. Now called the 'positive indigenisation list', it is meant to discourage imports in categories where local industry is self-sufficient. In 2007, when there were no indigenous programmes, the MoD had approved an army proposal to import and assemble 1,580 foreign howitzers for Rs 12,640 crore—400 howitzers were to be imported off the shelf and 1,180 were to be built within the country through technology transfers. Since then, three indigenous gun programmes have slowly started delivering guns to the army—the 'Dhanush', the ATAGS and the OFB's kit that upgrades existing Soviet-built 130 mm guns to 155 mm 'Sharang' howitzers.

Indian industry officials worry the 400-howitzer import will kill indigenous industry. "Such an order at a stage when Indian guns have matured will give a foreign gun maker a foot in the door," says a developer who wished to not be named. "It will enable future localised production of foreign guns and kill indigenous industry and innovation."

The industry is hopeful since earlier this year two ATAGS howitzers, one from each private developer, successfully completed winter trials in Sikkim. The two prototypes are headed to Rajasthan this month for summer trials. Successful completion of these trials will clear the acquisition of 150 ATAGS for Rs 3,365 crore. The order will be divided between the two private developers. The sudden move by China's People's Liberation Army's (PLA) motorised divisions in eastern Ladakh last May has made upgrading the army's firepower more

ADVANCED TOWED ARTILLERY GUN SYSTEM (ATAGS)

155/ 52 howitzer

Designed by: DRDO

Produced by: Tata Power SED and Bharat Forge

Status: Successfully completed high altitude PSQR trials in Sikkim between Jan. and Mar. 2021; firing in extreme temperatures of 15 degrees Celsius below zero and high altitude areas over 13,000 ft. Desert trials in Rajasthan in June 2021.

ATHOS TOWED ARTILLERY GUN SYSTEM

155/ 52 howitzer

Manufactured by: Elbit, Israel

Status: Elbit finished as lowest bidder in the Indian Army's towed gun contract in 2019. Procurement case pending in the MoD with DG (acquisitions). Army, citing urgent operational necessity, wants 400 guns to be processed quickly. MoD has said no.

MoD OFFICIALS HAVE SAID THAT ANY OFF-THE-SHELF IMPORT OF GUNS AT THIS STAGE WILL SERIOUSLY IMPACT INDIGENOUS ARTILLERY DEVELOPMENT

urgent. The ATAGS is still in development trials and the OFB is yet to deliver even the first complete regiment of Dhanush howitzers. The very real possibility of a border conflict has seen the army beefing up its force levels along the northern borders—'rebalancing', as the army calls it, by moving troops and materiel away from the Pakistan border in the west and towards the disputed northern frontier with China.

Howitzers are part of this rebalance. They can fire a 155 mm shell carrying over six kilograms of high explosive encased in more than 30 kg of steel. When they explode, they shower their targets with steel splinters travelling at supersonic speeds that can shred concrete and armour. Artillery is, hence, key to mountain warfare and is critical in offence and defence to support advancing infantry and armour through what is called 'indirect fire'. During the 1999 Kargil War, Indian artillery shellfire accounted for the bulk of the casualties suffered by Pakistan's army, destroying their supply lines and fortified bunkers. With its present commitments on two fronts, the Indian army doesn't have enough guns for both. A former army commander mentions a critical shortfall of tube and rocket artillery as one of the most alarming gaps in army units along the 3,448 km northern frontiers. This is possibly why the army decided to revive the 2019 case for the howitzer import. (The Indian Army declined to comment for this story.) Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat is believed to have backed the army proposal to import the guns, but with the caveat that indigenous howitzer programmes are to also be given breathing space.

In April this year, top army officials told the MoD about the time, cost and operational advantages of Israel's 155 mm 'ATHOS' (Autonomous Towed Howitzer Ordnance System). Under an accelerated delivery schedule, Israeli manufacturer Elbit has assured the army that the first 12 guns will be delivered within 14 months of signing the contract and all 400 guns will be delivered within 54 months. The Israeli gun's 15-tonne weight offers it an advantage over the 18-tonne ATAGS, particularly in difficult terrain without properly developed road networks. Moreover, ATHOS costs Rs 9 crore per gun, while the ATAGS costs Rs 22 crore per gun. To sweeten the deal, the Israeli vendor has reportedly promised to source 70 per cent of the gun's components from Indian industry to whom they will provide complete ToT (transfer of technology). ATHOS, the army told the MoD, is a one-time purchase to meet immediate operational requirements without impacting the indigenous programmes. But the ATHOS has problems of its own—it is not in service even in the Israeli army and had suffered structural failure during trials in India some years ago.

EXPERTS BELIEVE ATAGS NEEDS TIME TO MATURE AND THE ARMY NEEDS TO FIX THE DHANUSH PROGRAMME RATHER THAN PUSH FOR IMPORTS

New offers from the Israeli vendor could open up a potential minefield for the MoD, for they could mean modifications in the original Acceptance of Necessity (AON) of 2007 and the Request for Proposal issued in 2011. These deviations would need either a fresh CCS approval or, as in the case of the MMRCA fighter deal in 2016, a scrapping of the tender and a direct government-to-government buy, as was done with the 36 Rafale jets.

MoD sources told INDIA TODAY that no final decision has been taken on the proposal yet. "The Ministry of Defence is holding consultations with all concerned on this issue, keeping in mind the requirement of achieving the objectives of Aatmanirbhar Bharat, as well as giving the necessary teeth to our Armed Forces.... We have to work towards indigenous design, development and production of weapon systems to reduce dependence on arms imports and this has to be achieved without compromising the objectives of national security," they say.

Meanwhile, the DRDO-designed ATAGS successfully completed 90 days of winter trials in Sikkim between January and March 2021, putting a September 2020 incident, when an ATAGS barrel burst during firing trials, behind them. The guns displayed their mobility across a total of 500 km in night conditions, at temperatures of 15 degrees Celsius below zero and at altitudes of over 15,000 feet, and fired 160 rounds without any failures. "The gun has successfully cleared its winter trials and, if the army wants, they can be immediately deployed in the northern borders," says a developer who wished to not be named.

Developers say their indigenous guns negotiated all kinds of narrow- and low-load classification bridges in self-propelled mode and put to rest apprehensions about the ATAGS' mobility in mountainous terrain. The Elbit gun, they noted was put through far less rigorous trials in field trials in 2017, when it had been tested for mobility in high altitude areas only during day time. It was towed to Lukrep, the northernmost point of North Sikkim on the Tibetan plateau, and was tested at night in the snow-covered Menla and Changu Lake to ascertain operational efficiency.

Developers say the rarefied mountain air theoretically makes it possible for the gun to achieve ranges of up to 60 km, which would allow the army to engage the enemy's brigade headquarters, bridges and fuel dumps deep in its territory, giving them a tactical advantage from the beginning of a conflict.

Experts, however, believe that ATAGS needs time to mature and that the army needs to fix the problematic Dhanush programme rather than push for imports. The Dhanush was a gun the army's artillery directorate pushed the OFB to produce nearly a decade ago. It was built from blueprints supplied by Bofors AB in the 1980s. "I don't think ATAGS is the alternative for urgent operational requirements," says Lt General P. Ravi Shankar, former DG, artillery, who was involved in the design and development of both indigenous guns. "Why is a combat-proven gun system like the Dhanush not being operationalised despite production orders being given over a year ago? The programme needs hard decisions. If the Dhanush has a problem, it needs to be fixed. Call the original Bofors designers if need be," he says. OFB officials, however, deny the gun has an operational defect and say that the first 12 guns were delivered to the army in 2019. They believe the order for 20 guns can be completed by the end of this year. It remains to be seen how the government's June 16 decision to break up the monolithic OFB into seven companies will impact the Dhanush programme. In the short term, at least, fixing the Dhanush could give the army the guns it so badly needs. ■

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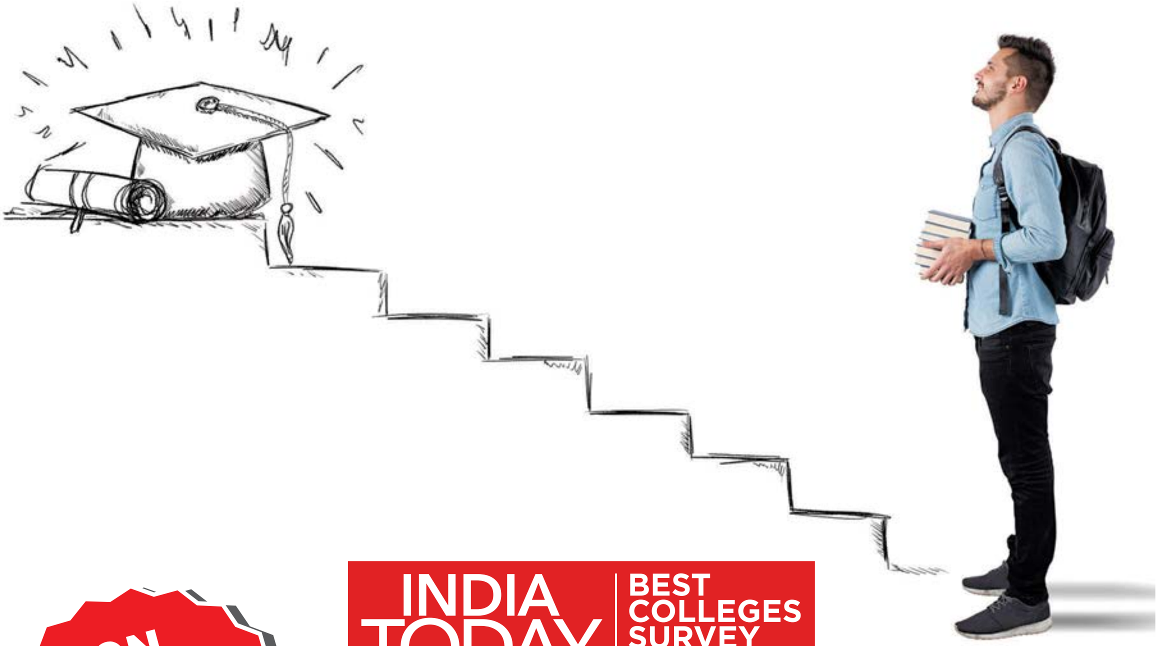

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ARTIYA JANAT

NEW COLOURS
Jitin Prasada (left) with Union minister Piyush Goyal at the BJP national HQ in Delhi, June 9

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

WOOING THE BRAHMIN VOTER

WHY POLITICAL PARTIES ARE CLAMOURING FOR THE COMMUNITY'S SUPPORT IN UTTAR PRADESH

By Ashish Misra

The ‘encounter’ death of Kanpur-based don Vikas Dubey, while he was in transit with a Uttar Pradesh police contingent, had the nation transfixed in July last year. Dubey’s gang killed seven policemen in an ambush in Bikaru village of Kanpur district on the night of July 2, 2020. Seven days later, he was shot dead too. During the hunt for the don, the police also killed six of his associates. Almost all of them, including Dubey, belonged to the Brahmin caste. Even as he was on the run, social media posts and forums had sprung up hailing him as a “saviour of Brahmins”.

But it was after his death that the community suddenly became a new focus of politics in Uttar Pradesh. Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) national president Mayawati accused the Yogi Adityanath government of trying to intimidate the Brahmin community in UP. In August 2020, Jitin Prasada, who was then a senior Congress leader, started a campaign to mobilise Brahmins through the organisation ‘Brahmin Chetna Parishad’, formed under his patronage. During the Covid transition days, Prasada was very active online on UP Brahmin forums, trying to make a case for the anti-Brahmin bias of the Yogi Adityanath government. He also wrote a letter to Yogi demanding restoration of the state holiday on Parashuram Jayanti, abolished by the BJP government after it was formed in 2017.

THE BJP IS WORRIED ABOUT THE BRAHMIN BACKLASH AGAINST THE PARTY AND, IN A BID TO COUNTER IT, IS ACTIVELY POACHING COMMUNITY LEADERS FROM OTHER PARTIES

But with less than a year to go before the 2022 assembly election in the state, the ruling BJP sprung a surprise. Apprehensive that its Brahmin vote might get dispersed, the party opened its doors to Prasada. On June 9, Union minister Piyush Goyal formally inducted Prasada into the party at the BJP’s national headquarters in Delhi. Soon after this, Adityanath tweeted saying that “Jitin joining BJP will strengthen the party”.

It may not be that easy. Amarnath Mishra, president of the ‘Brahmin Sansad’, an organisation that works to secure the interests of Brahmin society, says, “In 2017, the Brahmins had supported the BJP wholeheartedly. But this government has done nothing for us, either in providing employment or security. To add to this, a large number of Brahmins have been harassed, with false cases registered against them, and many innocent members of the community have been murdered. The community is very angry.” BJP state spokesperson Manish Shukla, however, refutes these allegations, saying “the Brahmin society has never got so much respect as it has under the Yogi government”.

Acharya Pramod Krishnam, a senior state Congress leader and the *peethadheeshwar* of the Shri Kalki Dham, Sambhal, says, “Brahmins have a prominent place in the Hindutva politics of the BJP. In UP, Brahmins along with their sub-castes make up close to 11 per cent of the population. The community is very unhappy with the Yogi government. For this very reason, the BJP will find it difficult to play the Hindutva card in the 2022 assembly election. They are now trying to do damage control by inducting a few Brahmin leaders... but they are not fooling anyone.”

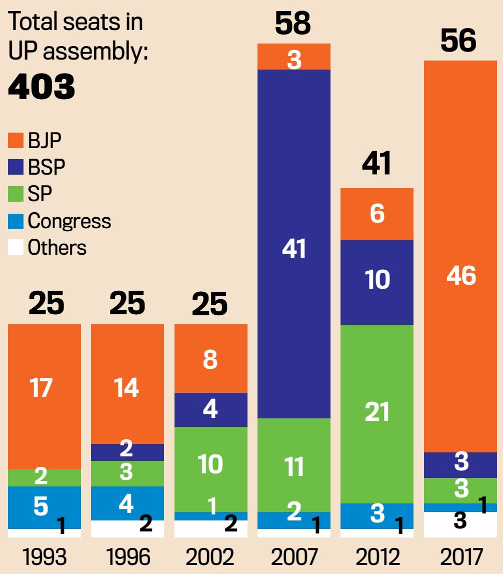
Political analysts are also looking at the Brahmins afresh, especially the way they vote. Prof. S.K. Dwivedi, former head of the department of political science at Lucknow University, says, “The Brahmin voter is actually a ‘floating voter’ whose main concerns are issues like security and employment. Political parties create a secure environment for themselves by getting Brahmins and other socially dominant upper castes on their side. It isn’t just coincidence that whenever a party sweeps the state, it also has the maximum number of Brahmin MLAs.”

A case in point is the BSP, which formed the government in UP in 2007 with 41 Brahmin MLAs (of a total of 403), while the Samajwadi Party (SP), which formed the government five years later, had 21 Brahmin MLAs (see graphic *On the Winning Side*). A total of 56 Brahmins won in the 2017 assembly poll; of these, 46 won on a BJP ticket. Is it any surprise then that before the 2022 assembly election, all the parties are once again wooing the Brahmins?

Before the 2017 election, the BJP had employed its evergreen turncoat strategy by getting seasoned Brahmin leaders from other parties to defect and join the party. Brajesh Pathak, a senior Brahmin leader from the BSP, crossed over in August 2016, followed by Rita Bahuguna Joshi, the then president of the state Congress, in October. The same strategy is in place now, with the saffron party trying to create a ‘conducive atmosphere’ for prominent Brahmin leaders from other parties to defect. Prasada wasn’t the first convert. Former BSP MP Seema Upadhyay, wife of Ramveer Upadhyay, the party’s Brahmin face in western UP and MLA from Sadabad in Hathras, joined the BJP on May 15. Ramveer too is likely to join before the election. Sources say after Prasada’s exit, many more young Brahmin leaders of the Congress in Purvanchal have been in touch with senior

ON THE WINNING SIDE

Brahmin representation in the UP assembly over the past three decades



Note: Numbers extracted from list of members released by Election Commission

BJP leaders. State BJP vice-president Vijay Bahadur Pathak dismisses the idea that the party is focused on Brahmin defectors. “People of all castes want to join us, based on the BJP policy of ‘*sabka saath, sabka vikaas*’. The Brahmin community is just one among them.”

The Samajwadi Party (SP), the other big player in UP, is also trying to woo the community through a proposed statue of Parashuram, the axe-wielding Brahmin warrior god. Two days after the *bhoomi pujan* of the Ram temple in Ayodhya on August 5, 2020, Abhishek Mishra, SP national secretary and a cabinet minister in the former Akhilesh Yadav government, announced that if the party came to power, they would instal a 108-ft-tall statue of Parashuram in capital Lucknow. Parashuram idols have already come up in 10 districts, including Jalaun, Orai, Shravasti, Balrampur and Gonda. Abhishek says, “A six-member team of SP leaders has been formed in all the districts to identify locations for the idol. We are also identifying a spot for a massive statue of Parashuram in Lucknow.” A social media post on a Brahmin community forum says: “In 2017, it was Ram *lahar* (wave), 2022 will be Parashuram *lahar*.”

Mayawati has also announced a Parashuram statue project if the BSP gets to form a government in UP. The BSP is trying to replicate the social engineering formula that brought it to power in 2007. So ‘Bhaichara committees’, like the ones formed in 2005 which brought together the Dalits, Brahmins and OBCs, are being formed in the districts. Amar Chandra Dubey, sector convenor of the Bhaichara committee in the Gorakhpur-Basti region, says, “We are running a campaign to connect young and experienced people from Brahmin society with the BSP. The bhaichara committee has held frequent meetings in every assembly constituency and we have had angry Brahmins joining us in large numbers.”

Before the 2017 assembly election, the Congress had projected former Delhi chief minister Sheila Dikshit as its CM candidate in UP. Later, the party contested with the SP but won only seven seats. Once called the party of Brahmins, the Congress currently has just one Brahmin MLA in the assembly. Prasada’s exit must be galling, but state in-charge and national general secretary Priyanka Gandhi has given important responsibilities to some of the Brahmin leaders to activate the party organisation. Aradhana Mishra, a two-time MLA from Rampur Khas assembly seat in Pratapgarh district and leader of the Congress Legislature Party, has been vigorously raising issues related to alleged “atrocities by the BJP government in UP” inside the House. State vice-president Laliteshpati Tripathi is in charge of the Congress frontal organisations in UP. Mohit Pandey, a former JNU (Jawaharlal Nehru University) students’ union president, heads the ‘UP Congress social media cell’ and is responsible for the party maintaining a robust presence online.

The Congress is also planning a new-look organisation in UP, with regional presidents dividing the party work in the four regions, East, West, Awadh and Bundelkhand. The four regional presidents will report to state president Ajay Kumar Lallu. Sources say that at least one of the four will be from the Brahmin community. Apart from this, former Rajya Sabha MP Pramod Tiwari, former MP from Varanasi, Rajesh Mishra, and Acharya Pramod Krishnam, who contested the 2019 Lok Sabha election from Lucknow, could get some big responsibilities. Acharya Krishnam says, “Congress leader N.D. Tiwari was the last Brahmin chief minister in UP in 1989. We haven’t seen a Brahmin as CM since. If the Congress projects a Brahmin leader as the chief minister, the party could get large-scale support from the community.” A Brahmin in the top spot may be a stretch given the caste complexities of the state, but the forward community will be reassured that it now has the ear of every political party in UP. Will the ‘Parashuram *lahar*’ work its magic this time too? ■

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THE SIZE OF DEVOTION

KCR's extravagant bid to outdo the Tirumala shrine, in a grand display of competitive religiosity, will cost the state Rs 1,800 crore

BY AMARNATH K. MENON

An artificial plateau has come up on a hillock at Yadagirigutta, some 70 km northeast of Hyderabad, and what was once a modest cave shrine has been transformed into a grand temple. Labourers are braving the torrid summer heat to build an ornate 330 feet long gold-coloured passage, which will be the corridor for worshippers to access the sanctum sanctorum of Narasimha Swamy—the part-lion, part-man avatar of Vishnu that Hindus revere as the incarnation that came to Earth to destroy evil and restore dharma.

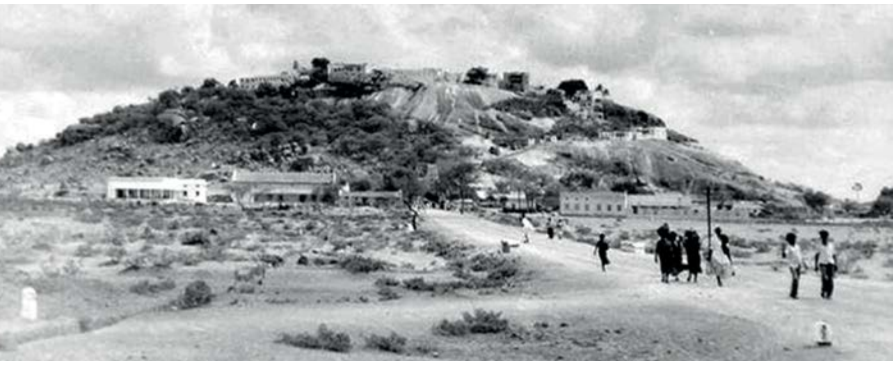
If Telangana chief minister K. Chandrashekar Rao (KCR) is to be believed, he is putting in place a "21st century world-class Hindu spiritual destination". And it's all being done at state expense. In March 2015, he launched the Rs 1,800 crore project spread over 1,885 acres, after shortening the name of the place to Yadadri from Yadagirigutta, in the hope that it will become a major temple tourism centre in the country. Apart from the shrine, the surrounding landscape is becoming a temple city, modelled on the popular shrine at Tirumala in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh. Until 2015, worshippers had to trudge down rocky terrain to reach the narrow cave and offer obeisance to the deity in the temple built in 1246 by Bommanna Dandanayaka, a commander of the Hoysala empire, during the rule of King Vira Someshwara.

For his dream project, KCR constituted a special Yadagirigutta Temple Development Authority (YTDA), vested with powers to enlist the services of all infrastructure, development and revenue authorities in executing the project. To advise the YTDA, a high-powered technical committee was set up to take on the engineering and other challenges. For this, the idol was temporarily shifted to a *balalayam* (a makeshift structure built conforming to ritual) to facilitate the construction of the new temple. The idol will be re-consecrated in the sanctum sanctorum of the new temple after a couple of weeks of pujas before the year ends.

RSIMHA CRAN

THE RISING (Clockwise from top) Aerial view of the temple now; elephant statues made of krishnashila at the east gopuram; the Yadagirigutta temple hillock 52 years ago; ongoing work on the queue line

KCR is conscious that chances of a third term in a row are slim unless he finds new ways to rally support, even more so with the BJP's rising influence in the state



All this has been done on the advice of Tridandi Chinna Srimannarayana Ramanuja Jeeyar Swami, 64, a monk known for his discourses on Vaishnavism. KCR reveres the monk (whose name too, like many Hindu seers, takes the deferential prefix Sri Sri) who has an ashram on the outskirts of Hyderabad.

KCR is conscious of the fact that the chances of a third consecutive term are remote unless he finds new ways to rally support, even more so with the BJP's rising influence in the state. Perhaps why he has turned to competitive religiosity by building a swank temple and trying to rival the richest Hindu shrine at Tirumala. "He is a religious man but is not above using faith as a stunt to try and win over people, just as he has used caste and group rivalries in the past for political survival," says political commentator C. Narasimha Rao, adding that "KCR's medieval mindset helps him in this in good measure".

The YTDA has also been selling the project as a future tourist destination to investors. Under a unique donor scheme, 252 four-bedroom homes on an adjacent hillock have been sold for Rs 1.5 crore each, for which patrons get privileged access to the temple with 30 days' stay every year. For the rest of the year, the YTDA, which will maintain the property, will earn rental income from transiting devotees. A presidential suite and 13 VVIP villas will be up in time for the opening of the temple. Sensing that the sale of temple *prasadam* and mass feeding schemes could kick up controversy, the YTDA has outsourced it to the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) which has expertise in mass catering.

During his last visit, KCR told officials to ensure that Yadadri becomes a role model for cleanliness and hygiene. "Everything, including electrification and illumination, should be done in a manner that awakens the feeling of *bhakti* and joy," he said. When the Yadadri project was launched, KCR had spoken of temple footfalls increasing steadily with time. Devotee response is still sluggish but the makeshift *balalayam* has been reporting higher footfalls than earlier.

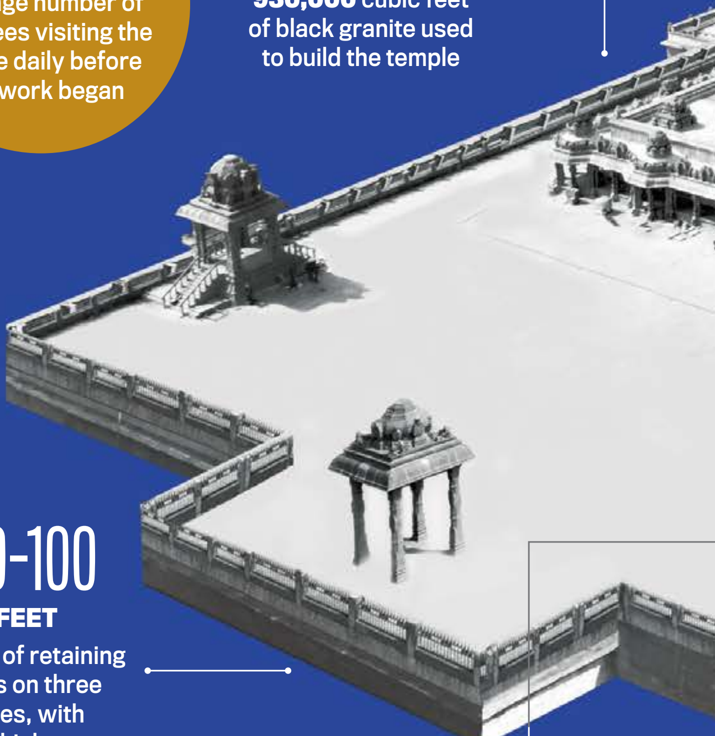
The temple and township plan have been conceptualised in keeping with an amalgam of traditions. From the 2,500 square yards to which it was originally confined, the temple area has been expanded to 4.5 acres on the hillock. Long retaining walls rising up to 100 feet have been built on three sides to accommodate the impressive edifice. The cement fortification is 4.5 feet thick and extends 1,300 feet to the south, 320 feet west and 1,000 feet to the north to provide the architectural elevation to make the temple visible from afar.

"The construction of the temple posed both engineering and architectural challenges as it involved turning an undulating slope into a zero level area and creating designs to use building material that would last for over 1,000 years," says G. Kishan Rao, CEO and vice-chairman of YTDA. "The construction is unique in that we have only used *krishnashila* (black granite), used by the Kakatiya emperors of Telan-

YADADRI IN NUMBERS

Grandiose Makeover

Graphic by **NILANJAN DAS**



6,500
Average number of devotees visiting the shrine daily before the work began

250,000
TONNES
Weight of the **930,000** cubic feet of black granite used to build the temple

80-100
FEET
Height of retaining walls on three sides, with **4.5 ft** thick cement fortification

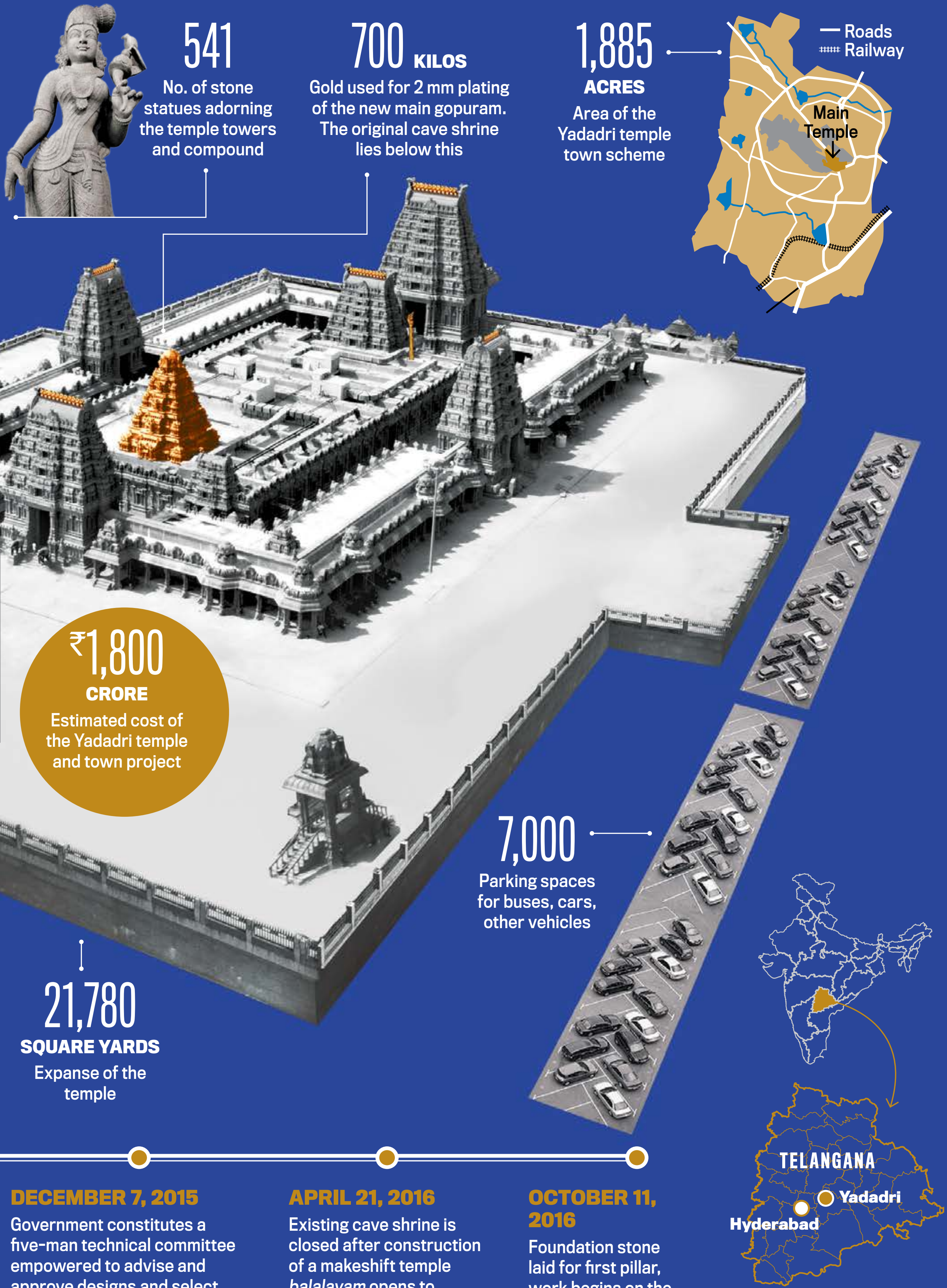
11,000
KILOS
Brass used to make wall panels and embellish temple doors

TEMPLE TIMELINE

Fast Forward

FEBRUARY 27, 2015
Telangana government constitutes the Yadagirigutta Temple Development Authority (YTDA) with the chief minister as its chairman

MAY 30, 2015
Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao lays the foundation stone for the temple and the surrounding temple town. The YTDA approves the plans for the temple and its precincts



541

No. of stone statues adorning the temple towers and compound

700 KILOS

Gold used for 2 mm plating of the new main gopuram. The original cave shrine lies below this

1,885 ACRES

Area of the Yadadri temple town scheme

₹1,800 CRORE

Estimated cost of the Yadadri temple and town project

7,000

Parking spaces for buses, cars, other vehicles

21,780 SQUARE YARDS

Expanse of the temple

DECEMBER 7, 2015

Government constitutes a five-man technical committee empowered to advise and approve designs and select contractors for execution of projects

APRIL 21, 2016

Existing cave shrine is closed after construction of a makeshift temple *balalayam* opens to perform pujas like in the main temple

OCTOBER 11, 2016

Foundation stone laid for first pillar, work begins on the new temple gana in temple architecture instead of modern material like cement and concrete,” explains Rao. The granite was sourced from the Gurijepalli quarries of Prakasam district in Andhra Pradesh after experts at Indian Institute of Technology, Madras, and the National Centre for Cement and Building Materials, Hyderabad, certified its durability.

All temple architecture work, including the inner and outer *prakarams* (compound walls), the stone pillars, affiliated temples, sculptures of gods and goddesses and Alwars (Vaishnavite saints) were finalised after temple architect and art director B. Anandsai visited over 60 temples across India. The original cave temple of Narasimha Swamy and the rock with a carving of Hanuman have not been touched. Everything else is new.

While the seven-storied, 100-feet-high *sapthathala maharajagopuram*, the tallest tower, is an imposing spectacle, six other features add to the temple’s splendour. At Yadadri, the construction of the *gopuram* is conspicuous with the use of black granite all the way to the top. Significant features of the temple are the *sapthathala maharajagopuram*, the cavernous 202-feet-long and 103-feet-wide chandeliered *mukha mandapam* with a 35-feet-high ceiling, the *ashta bhuji prakarams*, the mirror chambers and the black granite sculptures, including the seven-feet-tall lions at the east and west *gopurams* and the smaller ones at the north and south *gopurams*.

“It’s more like poetry in stone, the amalgam of sculptures. We have introduced several distinctive styles and traditions to make this temple magnificent in spiritual and architectural grandeur,” says Anandsai. “This includes the main temple in the Chalukyan style, the *mukhamandapam* and the 12 Alwars in the Kakatiya style, the outer *prakaram* reflecting Pallava designs, the *gopurams* in the Dravidian style with some having embedded statues and the queue line inspired by the Jain style.”

Apart from black granite, the sculptors have used traditional bonding material to ensure the temple structure lasts for centuries. To bind the granite slabs, a mix of lime mortar, *karakkaya* (Indian hog plum), jaggery, aloe vera and jute has been used instead of cement. This mix is believed to be “all-weather proof”. “The sculptures will not crack or melt for centuries as this mix is the adhesive,” says Anandsai. Some 500 sculptors and their assistants from Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana toiled for over two years in chiseling the granite into the right shapes. The work continued unmindful of the risks (at least a dozen workers have been seriously injured). “We have made sure that at all stages we comply with the Agama Shastra guidelines,” says chief sculptor Anandachari Velu.

KCR’s detractors kicked up a row suggesting that some images on the pillars resembled him, and were carved at the behest of his supporters

Agama Shastra lays down the rules and nuances for sculptors in temple construction, idol installation and worship rituals. Velu and his predecessor on the YTDA project, S. Sundara Rajan, have scrupulously followed this to steer clear of controversy. Yet, at one stage, KCR’s detractors kicked up a row suggesting that some images on the pillars resembled him and were allegedly carved at the behest of his supporters. There is other criticism too. “Temples are being built elsewhere too, like the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya, but it is with donations and other contributions, not state funds,” says Congress spokesperson Dasoju Sravan. “Public money should be used to build schools or hospitals. People may be enchanted by this film set-like structure but this is just to satisfy KCR’s vanity. He has a penchant for defacing historical public properties...he pulled down the Nizam-era state secretariat to build a vastu-compliant new building. KCR wants his Kalvakuntla family to be credited for Yadadri just as the Cholas are remembered for Tirumala.”

The original shrine, including the sanctum sanctorum, has been retained intact. The superstructure, the 48-ft, five-storied *vimana gopuram*, which was built atop the sanctum sanctorum, will be embellished with gold plating in the coming years. Officials justify the changes, saying the temple is not on the list of protected monuments. But critics disagree. “Yadadri may not be on the list of protected monuments but a beautiful cave shrine has been totally defaced with the blasting of the *gutta* (hill),” laments Anuradha Reddy, co-convenor, INTACH, Telangana. “Moreover, what has come up in its place is not in sync with regional heritage though it is in the middle of Kakatiya country.”

Of the Rs 852 crore spent so far on the project, Rs 248 crore was on the temple and the rest for land acquisition and infrastructure such as the four-lane road for smoother connectivity between the hillocks surrounding the temple, the six-lane Yadadri outer ring road and the scenic landscaping.

KCR wants to ensure that Yadadri is an impressive draw from day one. Downhill from the temple, a city is taking shape though not at the pace at which the temple was built. Structures being developed include an artificial lake, marriage halls, food courts, a shopping complex and a bus terminal besides a 25-acre horticulture park where flowers will be grown for use during the *pujas*. To kickstart the festivities, KCR is planning a Maha Sudharshana Yagnam, the mother of all *yagnas*, to coincide with the temple’s inauguration. Vaishnavite spiritual leaders from across the country will be invited to grace the occasion. ■

UEFA UERO 2020:
LIVE AND KICKING
PG 59

DRAWING THE
DISEASE
PG 62

LEISURE

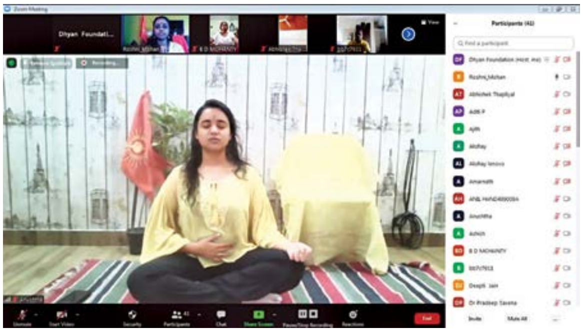
RELIVING
LOST ERAS
PG 60

Q&A WITH
VIDYA BALAN
PG 64

APOORVA JAYARAJAN, 30, is a hatha yoga practitioner who has more than 180,000 followers on Instagram

UPLOADING THE ASANA

With Covid having forced yoga practitioners to rely on social media and online tutorials, this year's National Yoga Day will first be celebrated on Zoom and Instagram



NO PLACE LIKE OM
Fitness expert Anshuka Parwani (top, left); and young teachers of Dhyan Foundation taking yoga classes online

ASHISH BALLAL

Few yoga studios are as familiar as Anshuka Parwani's in Bandra, Mumbai. A reliable celebrity-spotting location, paparazzi hover outside its gate to click the entry and exit of actresses like Kareena Kapoor Khan, Deepika Padukone, Alia Bhatt and Ananya Panday, to name a few. Parwani's high-profile clientele is one of the reasons she is among the most popular yoga practitioners on Instagram with over 152,000 followers. Another draw is her eclectic approach to fitness: offering everything from ashtanga yoga and yogalates (a combination of yoga and pilates) to "fly fit", a suspension fitness practice which, she says, takes the "yumminess" of three fitness genres—aerial yoga, aerial pilates and aerial fitness. Of late, due to the lockdown, there has been little activity outside the studio, but Parwani's business is flourishing online.

"I have been working overtime [through] the last year," says Parwani, who has seen her enterprise expand to the US and the UK. "My eyes are strained as I try to look at each posture." The Covid-19 pandemic, she adds, has seen a huge surge in demand. Private companies, for instance, are asking Parwani to train their employees in breath training in an effort to keep them healthy. As India battled a more pernicious second wave and doctors recommended breathing exercises like *pranayam* to patients isolating at home, yoga practitioners like Parwani realised there was a growing audience looking to practise yoga from the comfort of home. "Many turn to yoga to improve lung capacity and respiratory immunity," she says. "With Covid, it is the need of the hour. Our breath is the one constant that lasts until death but we are always breathing shallow. With yoga, every *asana* requires you to pause, tune in and be conscious of your breath."

Like Parwani, who turned to yoga after a bike accident left her bedridden for eight months, Pune-based Apoorva Jayarajan also used yoga to recover from the trauma of a bike accident. Both Parwani and Jayarajan would go on to leave their jobs as commercial pilot and fashion designer, respectively, to become fitness experts. They grasped the significance of social media early on. Jayarajan, 30, a hatha yoga practitioner, has 181,000 followers on Instagram and 12,500 subscribers on YouTube. Through brand collaborations and YouTube series like the '7-day yoga challenge', Jayaraman is able to earn revenue too. "In the pandemic, the importance of self care, both physical and mental, and a holistic approach to fitness has increased tenfold," says Jayara,jan who scripts, shoots and edits her own videos. Other Covid-specific offerings on Jayarajan's channel, 'Fitness with Apoorva', include 'chair yoga,' 'yoga in bed,' 'office break yoga' and *asanas* that cure everyday troubles of India's burgeoning WHF (work-from-home) population. Jayaraman has also had Covid-afflicted people asking for tips on how to breathe.

It should come as no surprise that the YouTube channel of The Yoga Institute (over 970,000 subscribers) boasts of a million views for "one magical *pranayam* to fight Covid" and other exercises for Covid-positive patients.

Free online yoga routines are now ever so common. Since its inception in 2002, Dhyan Foundation, a spiritual and charitable non-governmental organisation headquartered in Delhi, has held that yoga should be taught for free, the way it was in ancient *gurukuls*. It's a philosophy championed by Ashwini Guruji of Dhyan Ashram, the inspiration behind the foundation. During the pandemic, the foundation moved its classes online, with young teachers taking sessions. Besides *tandav mudras* and postures, the institute also offers special sessions for relief from Covid anxiety, *stotra* singing, *sanatan kriya* for balancing the body, special sessions for children and *dhyan* classes. Thanks to the internet, these sessions encourage a global participation, while also allowing volunteers like Karima Khan, a London-based biology lecturer, to help people battle anxiety through yoga and meditation sessions. "We start with the breath and take the participants through special practices that make you feel lighter and de-stress the body and mind," says Khan.

So, will online yoga fade into oblivion as lockdowns ease and real-world fitness institutions, like gyms and yoga studios, open again? According to Parwani, no. Even as she opens up her studio to actresses and braces for the return of the paparazzi, she is confident that her online business will continue to thrive. "There is nothing like a live class," she says, "but people now understand that they do not need to be in the same place and others prefer [online] because a lot of time is saved." Relax. Take a deep breath. Yoga is now just a click away. ■

–Suhani Singh
(with inputs from Ridhi Kale)

LIVE AND KICKING

There is palpable excitement in the air as footballers get back on the field for the UEFA Euro 2020

After a year's delay, Euro 2020 kicked off on June 11 in Rome, in front of a small but loud crowd. It seemed apt, poignant. Italy had suffered more and earlier than most due to the Covid-19 pandemic and here, perhaps, was a sign that something resembling normal life was close to resuming. When Andrea Bocelli, natty in an Azzurri-blue jacket (though the team itself, irritatingly, wore white on the night), sang '*Nessun Dorma*', Puccini's stirring aria from *Turandot*, with its sustained final notes of triumph, the nostalgia for Italia 90 was palpable. You could feel the heartache through the screen.

Fortunately, after years in the footballing wilderness, the Italians have a team of which they can be proud. Its coach Roberto Mancini, once a glossily skilled showpony of a player, has created a team of workhorses, full of running and enterprise. And in Napoli's wonderfully busy, clever Lorenzo Insigne, this aggressive, high-pressing Italian side has one of the potential players of the tournament.

Like the Italians, England, too, has been mired in nostalgia, for the time it hosted the European Championships a quarter of a century ago. One of its stars, the brilliant Phil Foden, has even dyed his hair a garish yellow in memory of Paul Gascoigne whose genius lit up Euro 96. At Wembley, one of the 11 host stadiums of this spread-out commemorative 60th birthday Euros, a talented if brittle England team eked out a narrow victory over Croatia, World Cup finalists in 2018, having disposed of England in the semis, but now past their best.

The favourites to win the whole thing, of course, are world champions France. It finds itself in the 'group of death', alongside Portugal and a Germany squad in one of its infrequent periods of transition, and its buildup to the tournament has disintegrated into a petty spat between its coruscating young superstar Kylian Mbappe and the underrated veteran Olivier Giroud, just five goals behind Thierry Henry in the list of top French goalscorers. But the French have unmatched depth and in N'Golo Kante, perhaps the best, if most unassuming, player in the world, a midfielder so energetic and tenacious, it is as if, in the words of an admiring Chelsea teammate, he does the work of three players.

Apart from France, the team to watch out for is Belgium, for whose magnificent collection of players the opportunities to win a major tournament and fulfil their undoubted ability are running out. Already, in its opening weekend, Euro 2020 has had exciting games (Holland vs. Ukraine), a sobering moment of near-tragedy (the collapse of Denmark's Christian Eriksen in a game that resulted in an ultimately hollow first triumph at this level for Finland), and signalled the start of an Italian renaissance. Despite the odds, can football (the Copa America is also on) spark some life, some joy back into our scarred, enervated world? ■

–Shougat Dasgupta

Switzerland's players train in Baku on June 11, 2021, on the eve of their UEFA EURO 2020 match against Wales

OZAN KOSE/AFP/ Getty Images

Reliving Lost Eras

Shan Bhattacharya's account of a photographer's obsession immerses the reader in the photographic cosmos of Kolkata

You can look at *Portal* as a kind of 'photo book', as a diary-cum-scrapbook, or as as a folder full of notes, photos and clippings bracketed by two short texts. This cluster of images and writings cleaves to a basic narrative, like muscles, veins and nerves wrapping around a broken, discontinuous, spinal column. The text toggles mostly between two languages, English and Bangla, sometimes typset, sometimes typwritten, with the Bangla usually in the form of handwritten entries in one of those company diaries complete with a saying or aphorism at the bottom of each dated page. The structure of the 'story' is classic one of a bottomless rabbit-hole: a man of no special qualities runs a small photo studio in north Calcutta; one day he takes a portrait of a newly married couple; from this moment he keeps coming across the visage of the wife in various places, the exact (or glancingly similar) face in photographic images taken around Calcutta and Bengal from the late 1890s to the early 1990s. In the narrative, the studio photographer disappears after becoming obsessed with following the image of this woman, and our narrator, Shan Bhattacharya, becomes obsessed with the photographer's obsession and starts to do his own detective work. As we turn the pages, stories connected to certain photographs hook us and then peter out, visual trails warm up and go cold, stories ignite from corners of newly discovered images, facts and dates contradict each other, faces fade or mutate, emulsion becomes treacherous, what we are looking at questions us.

BOSE COLOUR STUDIO
PORTAL The Curious Account of Achintya Bose

PORTAL
The Curious Account of Achintya Bose
By Shan Bhattacharya
SSAF–TULIKA BOOKS
₹1,250; 102 pages
(plus booklet)

You find yourself immersed in the photographic cosmos as it forms in Calcutta and Bengal. The object itself—the photograph—changes shape and slips between contexts. There are the many different kinds of monochrome, there are images taking on the different avatars of colour photography as it evolves from the early '60s to Polaroids to QSS colour prints in the last pre-digital days. As Bhattacharya points out in interviews, the dynamic relationship between the photographer and subject also changes across the decades, from the fear and formality of the studio portrait with a heavy view camera to the casual blur of a stoner party in the 1980s. Going through the book, we examine the changing function of the photographic image, portrait, travel evidence, documentation, social instruction, advertisement, surveillance espionage or a semi-erotic ritual.

To realise that the book is entirely a work of imagination, you have to look up the background of the project online, leading to the question: why is the fact that this is fiction not indicated anywhere in the book? One could understand a jeu d'esprit where the reader is lured onto unstable ground before the fictionality is revealed, perhaps with a discreet line at the very end. It is unclear why this is left unstated as it robs the reader's engagement of the richness that a second reading with this awareness would have provided.

The book works at the deepest level for those who can read both languages and are well acquainted with Calcutta's cultural and political history. It will invite others to learn more about these trajectories and milieus. No reader from Calcutta would be satisfied without a quibble over detail and so one has to ask: why do letters supposedly written by an Englishman (one from the US and one from London) use the American dating of month-day-year when other letters by the same man use date-month-year? ■

–Ruchir Joshi

PHOTOGRAPHY

MAPPING MUMBAI

Mayur Tekchandaney's photo book trains the lens on a city in a constant state of flux

Visual journeys celebrating the indomitable spirit of Mumbai have long reached saturation levels. From Sooni Taraporevala to Raghu Rai, photographic books on it are plentiful. Yet, that didn't stop Mayur Tekchandaney from claiming his own share of what Suketu Mehta called a "lovely vision of belonging". In the making since 2015, Tekchandaney's *Still Bombay* is a portrait of the everyday rituals of the constantly evolving megapolis. It's both a tribute and an attempt at decoding what makes the Maximum City special. "Bombay means different things to different people. This is my interpretation of a lived history," says the longtime Mumbaikar. Neither photojournalistic nor academic, "it's something much more personal," he adds.

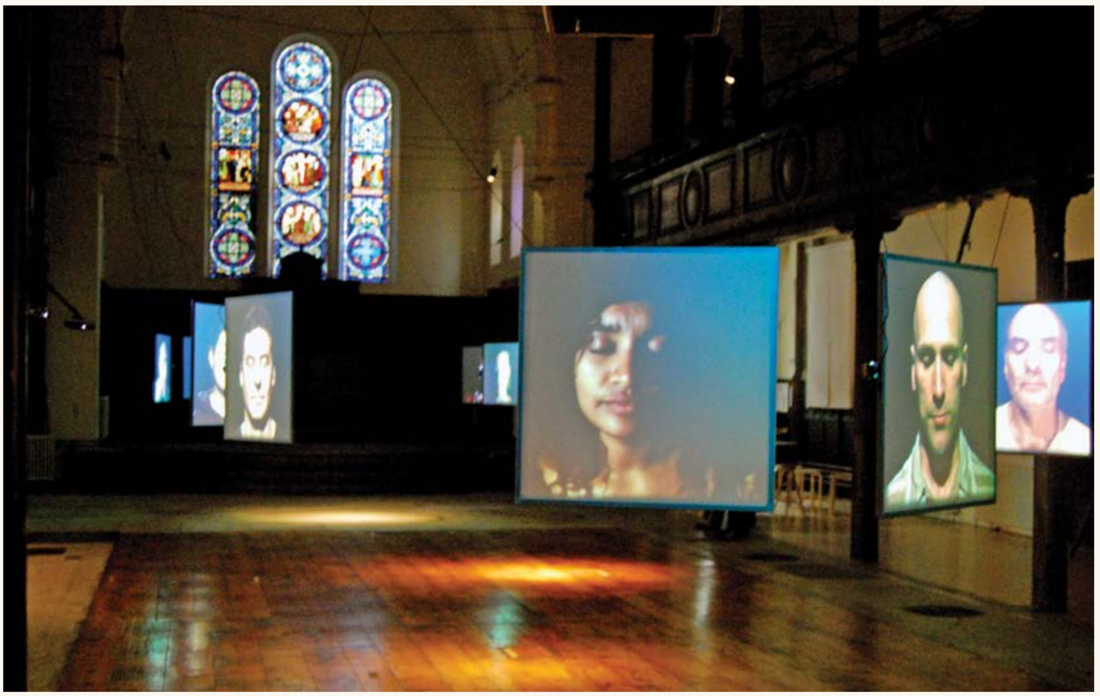
At 256 pages, the book is a quick flip, interspersed with short musings from Tekchandaney about why Mumbai is an idea and emotion rather than just a place. Sifting through it, you wonder why the streets look so hauntingly crowdless? Most of the photos, it seems, were taken in the early mornings. They tell tales of hope, dream and struggle, tales of a city in a constant state of flux. As Mumbai undergoes a radical transformation, this may be a good moment to document it, after all. For a megapolis that never sleeps, the city these days is an in-between entity with urban planners chipping away at its past to carve out a new future. Tekchandaney, though, is evidently drawn to another duality which is not going anywhere anytime soon—the stark inequality. Admitting that one of his aims was to bring out this contradiction, the 43-year-old professional graphic designer says, "One family has occupied one of the richest homes in the world in a city where half the population lives in slums. Is it fair?" The opulent Ambani family residence Antilia makes a sneaky appearance in the book, but much of *Still Bombay* is the undercity going about its business.

STILL BOMBAY
by Mayur Tekchandaney
TARA BOOKS
₹1,100; 256 pages

The project was partly born out of a sense of nostalgia—a search to reclaim the Bombay that exists only in the memory of locals like Tekchandaney himself. It happened by chance. In 2015, he had a torn ligament. Still recovering, he started taking short walks with a Nikon camera. Though not formally trained, he began by photographing the streets near his Bandra home before venturing to other pockets like Juhu, Dharavi, Mahim and Marine Drive, among others. Initially, the epiphanies came in small waves, like when he first noticed that the fallout of the rapid gentrification of his childhood suburb was reflected in the building names. The newly redeveloped highrises had lofty names like 'Gorwani Excellenza', 'Pallazo Opulence' and 'Kamla Presidente', replacing the rooted comforts of 'Rendezvous', 'Shantivan' or 'Cuz-Inn Apartments'. The new building names suggested not so much nouveau riche arrogance as a "disconnect from grounded reality".

Tekchandaney, who has devoted a large section of the book to architectural facades, public spaces and shantytowns for reasons both aesthetic and symbolic, says, "Growth is good and I have no problems with gated communities. But when you shut your door to the less privileged, you are essentially stopping others from taking part in the cultural conversation. Where's your empathy? Growing up, our homes leaked into the street and there were playgrounds and beaches where different classes met. That intermingling is missing today." ■

—Shaikh Ayaz



ART

Drawing the Disease

A virtual exhibition tries to make sense of the pandemic—drawing from both older contagions and modern ones

Quarantined ships, a pesky-looking flea, homes being disinfected, a hospital under attack—in artist Ranjit Kandalgaonkar's 'Drawing the Bombay Plague', the city's 1896 pandemic comes alive in all its dramatic imagery. Whether containment measures, mass exoduses, or misinformation, many of the themes in his 10-feet-wide drawing resonate today. "I wanted it to be a cautionary tale," says Kandalgaonkar about the work commissioned in 2017 by Wellcome Collection in the UK. "The drawing was a process of research and discovery. I also wanted to add to our understanding of the plague, to interrogate rumour, myth, paranoia. I hoped to document both what I found in the archives, but also people's understanding and imagination of the period."

It is one of 15 artworks being displayed at Science Gallery Bengaluru's *Contagion*, an interactive digital exhibition themed around the mobility of disease, information and emotions. Up for viewing until December-end, the exhibition ranges across time and space; showcasing works drawing on the lives of HIV-positive individuals and the cholera epidemics in New York in 1832 and Haiti in 2010. Other recognisable modern viruses also appear: computer malware and fake news.

"The global perspective was very important, we wanted to show that [epidemics] have happened in other times and places and that we are not alone," says Jahnavi Phalkey, the founder-director of the gallery and co-curator of *Contagion*. The idea for the exhibition coalesced during the first lockdown last March and opened at the end of this April, when the second wave was at its deadliest. "When it is happening to you, you don't want to be punched with it again in the face, you want some distance from the suffering and bad news," says Phalkey. "That's why we broadened it geographically and in time but also in the approach to the phenomenon; not only disease but emotions, behaviour and ideas." Workshops and lectures featuring artists, historians and scientists are also part of the exhibition. "We try to create a cross-disciplinary space for collaboration and conversation," says Phalkey, and raise with the public "the relevance of research in their day-to-day lives".

Grim themes like death and loss undergird many of the artworks, but even joyful things, the exhibition shows, can be contagious

The exhibition is dynamic and immersive, unfolding in a myriad, tangential directions and unlocking varied modes of enquiry. Pathogens can be both sources of terror and subjects of art. Medicines can be both miraculous and hopeless. Archival images, video, sound, maps

and to try to get them used to live with the virus.

BARBER AT WORK IN ONE OF THE CAMP.

VIRAL ART Snapshots from exhibitions that are part of *Contagion*—(clockwise from left) *The Chameleon Project*; *Fluid Dialogues*; *Controlling the Plague in British India*; and *Putting the Ant in Antibiotics*

and text are all deployed in pursuit of answers to questions about stigma, suppression and fear. “There are so many parallels with the past, how human behaviour works or the body becomes weaponised,” says Kandalgaonkar. “I was interested in looking at unseen or overlooked aspects of social history.”

Grim themes like death and loss undergird many of the artworks, but even joyful things can be contagious. Like giggles. “When the World was a Laugh”, by Anaïs Tondeur, a Paris-based visual artist, is both infectious and delightful. Tondeur kickstarted the project last March with the onset of the pandemic and lockdown, collecting laughs from France, India, Morocco and elsewhere. They range from nervous and uproarious to chortling and vivacious. “I was really attracted to the idea of working with human expression,” says Tondeur. “How this could create links with people even if we could not meet.” A video as part of the work also tells a story through sounds and vibrations. “Laughter can help in this moment,” she says, “transforming distress into creative energy.” ■

—Bhavya Dore

PHOTOGRAPHY

THE FIRST SHOT

Ragul Krishnan’s pictures of Pune’s Serum Institute show us how science came to our rescue

Photojournalist Ragul Krishnan sensed something big was in the offing when a former professor called him in February this year, asking if he was free to shoot in Pune. “When I was told I would be shooting inside the Serum Institute of India (SII), I was elated. This was big for me and my portfolio,” he says. Krishnan, 26, has always had an eye for narrative. For him, pictures are like jokes—ruined if you have to explain them. UNICEF would be publishing and distributing the photos he took. There was little room for error.

The SII was preparing its first batch of Covishield vaccines for Ghana when Krishnan was given access to its facilities. More than wearing PPE, Krishnan found difficult the strict time constraint. He was expected to document the journey of a single vial, all the way from its manufacture to packaging, in just 10 minutes. “I couldn’t interrupt anyone. I had to make myself invisible because even a small mistake could lead to a terrible accident,” says Krishnan. He knew that this moment had significance: “These vials could save a person’s life, and, also, the world.”

The women and men in Krishnan’s pictures work meticulously and frantically. There’s nothing artful about the surroundings. What you see is science in motion. Human beings, clad in that claustrophobic PPE, seem more like cogs in a fast-turning wheel. Krishnan wonderfully records their diligence and clockwork precision.

In **RAGUL KRISHNAN’S** photos of Pune’s Serum Institute, one can see science in motion

Since every act he saw was imbued with purpose, Krishnan knew none of his images could be random. In the end, he gave UNICEF 200-odd pictures. He doesn’t mind they are being released slowly: “I was able to shoot the facilities of the world’s largest vaccine manufacturer at a time like this! I am thrilled.” Ironically, Krishnan himself is yet to be vaccinated. ■

—Shreevatsa Nevatia

RAGUL KRISHNAN

LIKE CLOCKWORK Workers at SII, Pune

DABBOO RATNANI

‘I WON’T EVER GO UNDER THE KNIFE’

Vidya Balan on how *Sherni* made her more conscious about the environment and on not being fazed by the film industry’s artificial standards of beauty

Q. In *Sherni*, You play a forest officer trying to capture a troubled tigress. Had you seen a tiger in the wild before?
No, but when my niece and nephew visited Tadoba (National Park in Maharashtra), they had sent me many pictures and videos of tigers. It is an awe-inspiring majestic creature. There’s mystery and drama around them. *Sherni* explores the man-animal conflict through the tiger.

Q. What did you gain from the experience of making the film?
Earlier, I never really understood the complexity of the issues around conservation or how it impacts our lives. Coexistence is imperative because the balance has been altered. I used to be scared of insects and snakes. Not any more. I stayed in a tent while making this film and it was a life-changing experience.

Q. Kate Winslet recently spoke of not allowing her photos to be retouched for a poster of *Mare of Easttown*, her new show. Are beauty standards for actresses changing in India, too?
Yes and I have been trying to do it in my way, but it will take time. I’m not willing to go under the knife. If I have lines, I have them. If my face became constricted, then that would be the end of me as an actor. I have come to accept myself.

Q. Neither *Shankuntala Devi* nor *Sherni* were made for OTT but premiered on Amazon Prime. Are you happy with an online release?
The beauty of OTT is that it affords you the freedom of choice; you can watch whatever you want, whenever you want. It’s not a lesser choice; it offers you a wider and newer audience.

–with Suhani Singh

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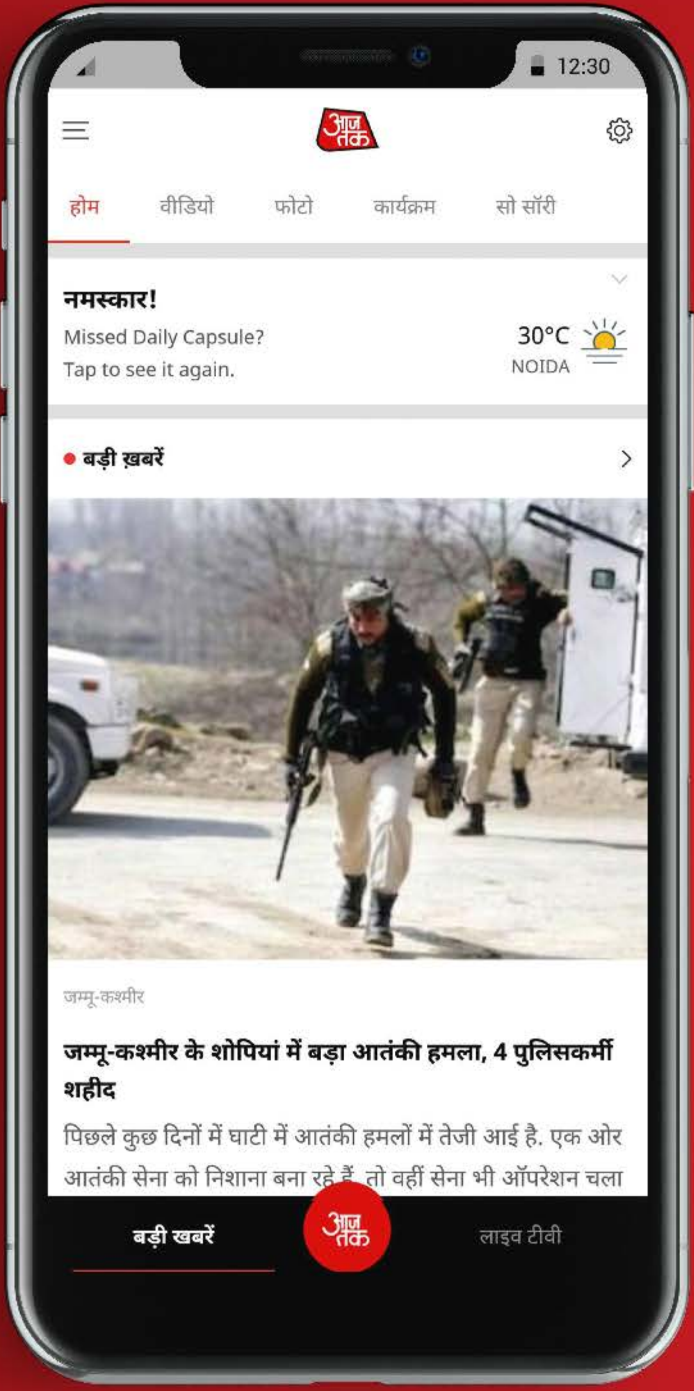
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पिछले कुछ दिनों में घाटी में आतंकी हमलों में तेजी आई है. एक ओर आतंकी सेना को निशाना बना रहे हैं, तो वहीं सेना भी ऑपरेशन चला